University of Alberta

Aboriginal Student Experience at the University of Alberta

By

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In

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Abstract

Quantitative measurements of student demographics at the University of Alberta are categorized to measure how many Aboriginal students complete University degree programs. These and other quantitative study results indicate that Aboriginal representation on campus is lower than the same representative portion of mainstream society. The University has implemented policies that are intended to assist the recruitment, retention and graduation of Aboriginal students. To date these have failed to increase Aboriginal proportional representation on campus. My research was targeted to gain insight into the goals and aspirations of current Aboriginal students utilizing informal discussions and semi-structured interviews with a small group of Aboriginal students from across faculties. A secondary purpose was to identify specific factors that have either assisted or inhibited the pursuit of those goals. Through investigating the effectiveness of internal support structures currently in place, factors are identified informing recommendations to increase relevancy of University Aboriginal student policies.

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If any good is contained in these pages, it is a direct result of the influence of the people named above. Any errors within are solely my responsibility.

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Preface: Placing Myself in My Research

This research investigates Aboriginal student experiences at the University of Alberta, in relation to the services offered to Aboriginal people. The University views Aboriginal students who have left their programs incomplete as evidence of its failure to retain them. As such, there are existing student services at the University designed specifically with the Aboriginal student in mind. The research will investigate the goals of currently enrolled Aboriginal students and their views regarding achievement, with the potential to inform the University to better its performance in this area. Due to the context and subjective nature of the qualitative methodology utilized in this research project, it is fitting that I position myself within my research at the outset in order to identify some of the assumptions that I bring to the project and their origins.

I am an Aboriginal[1] person in Canada. The Indian Act of Canada defines me as an Indian[2]. I am a member of the Aamjinaang First Nation (Chippewas of Sarnia) located in Southern Ontario. My formal education prior to University entrance was at a community college in Ontario and a technical institution in Alberta. My studies focused in the areas of mechanical engineering technology and liquid hydrocarbon transmission. Since

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[1] The following footnotes are definitions of the terms often used when referring to individuals and their associated groups who trace their ancestry on this continent prior to European arrival. These definitions will help in understanding how and why I use these terms throughout this research.

Aboriginal: This term is used in reference to individuals in Canada who fall within the constitutionally defined categories of First Nations (Indians and non-status Indians), Inuit and Métis. Use of the term Aboriginal is in reference to these officially defined categories of individuals in the Canadian population.

[2] **Indian**: In Canada, since 1876, Indians are legislated as wards of the state. Official policy is shifting this designation towards self-determination; however, the federal government still maintains a list of all individuals who satisfy the definition in the Indian Act to determine who is allowed to be an Indian. As one of the constitutionally defined Aboriginal peoples, Indians prefer to be identified as members of the First Nations.

shifting my academic focus to Native[3] Studies and Indigenous Peoples[4] Education, much of my University education has been from and with Aboriginal people at the University of Alberta.

Considering that my research investigates the Aboriginal student experience at the University of Alberta, I feel positioned as an insider in several ways. My Aboriginal family or community did not raise me. Instead, I was subjected to the prevailing Canadian social welfare policy of the 1960's that discouraged Aboriginal children from remaining with their families and instead, encouraged removal from their communities and placement into non-Aboriginal homes. Assimilation of Aboriginal children into the Canadian mainstream was the desired outcome of the institutions of Canada since before Confederation. The British Imperial Government policy towards assimilation of Aboriginal people using education as a tool, began in 1856. The Colonial Department of Indian Affairs "began to refine its approach in the growing belief that adult Indians could not be changed, resulting in an emphasis upon educating children" (IRSRC, 2007, para. 5). Through the Residential School Era (Bull, 1991; Lee, 1992; RCAP, 1996a: Fournier & Crey, 1997) to the Sixties Scoop era of Provincial Child Welfare (LaFrance, 2006; Sinclair, 2004), Aboriginal children have been targeted for assimilation into the Canadian mainstream. In 1920, the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs in Canada, Duncan Campbell Scott, summed up the prevailing intent:

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[3] **Native**: In the North American context, the term Native refers to individuals and associated groups who trace their ancestry to this continent prior to European arrival. Often used interchangeably with Aboriginal and/or Indian. Confusion often arises with use of this term due to its multiple definitions in the English language. Context is important when this term is used.

[4] **Indigenous Peoples**: Individuals and associated groups who have a historical continuity with an ancestral knowledge base and methods of knowledge creation, that stems from the relationships with regional surroundings and the animation of life associated with those surroundings, for thousands of years. Often referred and self-identified through distinct linguistic, cultural and social characteristics.

> Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department (Leslie & Maguire, 1978, p. 115; as cited in RCAP, 1996a).

This is not simply an old outdated statement of intent. As late as 1969 this intent has been stated publicly by the Federal Government:

> The ultimate aim of removing the specific references to Indians from the constitution may take some time, but it is a goal to be kept constantly in view…The Government is therefore convinced that the traditional method of providing separate services to Indians must be ended (Government of Canada, 1969).

The residential school system and child welfare system were the vehicles of these objectives of assimilation with goals of "acculturating Aboriginal people to a western way of living and thinking" (Sinclair, 2004, p. 51), and social workers played an important role in the smooth operation of these vehicles.

> During the residential school period, complicity occurred through the social workers who accompanied the police on their forays onto reserves to remove the children. After the residential school period, the profession unquestioningly aligned itself with the assimilation policies manifested in the transracial fostering and adoption of Aboriginal children (Fournier & Crey, 1997).

I am a product of such policies. Therefore, I have the lived experience and knowledge of institutional assumptions and superiority complexes. Awareness of the prevailing racism

(societal and institutional) through my childhood and youth was reason to hide my Indian status. I believe the fact that I was not raised in an Aboriginal community is very pertinent to my academic achievements. I was immersed in the acculturation process of institutional authority completely supported by my adopted parents. This can be thought of as replacing my education in Aboriginal culture with the education of dominant Canadian culture. Measurable achievement (school grades & diplomas) and unquestioning compliance (Christianization & law abiding citizenship) were taught to me by my loving, nurturing adopted parents of European descent.

As an adult, I have come to question much of what middle-class Canada takes as normal, while simultaneously perpetuating that lifestyle. This is an internal contrast that helps my understanding of the socially constructed nature of reality. I am as comfortable working and raising my family within the institutional structures of middle-class Canadian society as I am now coming to learn indigenous perspectives and the socio/cultural structures and experiences from where those perspectives originate. Reuniting with my birth family and community, combined with studying for a Bachelors degree in Native Studies, has allowed me the lived experience of learning that the "truths" of Canadian history are not the same as those portrayed in my childhood acculturation into the Canadian middle-class including my institutional education.

Today, I am learning about indigenous knowledge, hence I make no claim to be the holder of indigenous knowledge. It is true that considerations of indigenous methodologies of knowledge creation have entered into my realm of experience, practice

and thoughts when proposing courses of investigation. But these personal considerations are relatively new, as I was neither raised by Aboriginal people, nor exposed to indigenous language, culture or knowledge until later in life. As an adult, I do not yet speak my Aboriginal language. Witnessing and participating in the respect given by indigenous peoples to their ancestral languages, methodologies of knowledge creation, relationships with the earth, societal structures and the shared colonial experience has provided me with a meaningful education. These areas are where I have developed a very real sense of belonging and peace with my identity that was missing.

Oscar Kawagley has observed from his emic position as an Aboriginal person and an academic that for some Aboriginal students, the classroom is perceived as a "hostile environment" (1995, p.147). This has not been my experience; in fact, for me, the opposite is true. Therefore in this project I must be careful not to assume the comfort level and experience of the Aboriginal student participants in the classroom has been as supportive, invigorating and gratifying as my own.

Insider-Outsider Perspectives

Fifty years ago, linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike "coined the terms etic to refer to the man-from-Mars (*detached observer*) view, and the term emic for that of the normal participant" (1957, p. 145) (Italics mine). In this distinction, I find a methodological tool to distinguish between my lifetime of acculturation to institutional navigation and my experiences as an Aboriginal person. An awareness of what I interpret as a duality in my perspective requires the explicit distinction in my approach to this research. In this way, I

feel the danger of an ethnocentric application of analysis to the data may be avoided. This is an evaluative relativism position. I find the application of relativism in this evaluative sense, a useful tool in positioning myself in this and other research projects. However, such relativism must be employed with caution and "should not be taken too far" (Hanson, 1975, p. 45). The cautionary awareness is to avoid extending into epistemological relativism. It is neither the validity nor the nature of knowledge, or ideas of knowledge creation that is being investigated. Outlined in my assumptions later in this preface, I suspect that epistemological differences may occur between Aboriginal students and the institution; however, this research does not specifically explore those differences. I am exploring the experiences of Aboriginal students for insight regarding the services at the University.

Therefore, an emic position provides access to qualitative data that previously may have gone unobserved by the etic, detached objective observer. For example: in examining the overwhelming disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student retention and graduation statistics, the obvious conclusion must be that, in spite of measurable improvements, Canadian institutional education is still failing Aboriginal peoples. Educational institutions have made attempts to better their performance in these areas. The University of Alberta is no exception. As identified in the next chapter, policies and services specifically designed to increase Aboriginal retention and graduation have been developed and put in place. However, the Aboriginal representation enrolled and graduating is still shockingly below comparable demographics of Aboriginal peoples in

Canadian society. From the etic, institutional perspective, the question remains how to increase Aboriginal retention and graduation.

The ability to place myself as acculturated within Canadian institutions and, more importantly, aware of that acculturation, provides understanding of the etic view from the centre of that place often referred to as mainstream society. From this position, viewing the objective stance of the University as being one of offering benefits and services to individuals (and society,) is logical. It can be demonstrated by citing better employment opportunities for graduates and offering better trained individuals to existing institutions and bureaucracies. To participate in that perceived good, individuals must work hard and personal sacrifice is required to become accredited.

It has also led me to the research question. Throughout my student experience at the University, the presence of few Aboriginal student peers has been noticeable. The University is trying to increase participation rates of Aboriginal students by offering specific services. Social justification for such services comes by equating more Aboriginal University graduates with improvement in the socio/economic position of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

This appears to be a logical response when viewed from the etic position. When viewing my personal position within the middle class, then my earning potential and opportunity are a direct result of my educational achievements, which are modeled after the achievements of the non-Aboriginal mentors of my youth. The ability to approach the

research question from an etic position stems from my lived experience of being raised within dominant non-Aboriginal social norms. In this case, the etic position is a detached observer endeavoring to understand the factors which appear as failing to increase or retain Aboriginal representation at the University.

Discovering the marginalization of my First Nation through the vehicle of Canadian institutional assimilation ideologies, policies and practice, has been a catalyst for my endeavors in coming to understand the Aboriginal experience. It has also placed me on an educational journey independent of the University. This is my journey into the realm of indigenous ways of knowing. This journey has included the decolonization of my interpretations of what is deemed as 'normal' in contemporary mainstream society. The awareness and resultant respect for an indigenous way of being, stemming from those ways of knowing, has been influential and life altering. Who I am today is remarkably different from who I was prior to these discoveries. It is also a journey of rebirth and union with that which is deemed important to Aboriginal peoples. The legacy of indigenous thought regarding our place and role in this universe, and in some cases, a birthright.

When I position myself as an Aboriginal student at the University, I interpret this position as an emic perspective. My years of study at the University of Alberta enabled many personal relationships with Aboriginal individuals to develop. I am a natural participant (along with my peers) in relation to the services offered for Aboriginal students.

> The etic criteria are frequently, therefore, measurable as such, without reference to the system in which they are embedded, while emic criteria are contrastive, and observable only in reference to differential responses which they elicit in relation to other units of the system (Pike, 1957, p. 146).

These are the experiential and cognitive positions from which I approach the present research question. The emic position as an Aboriginal student has provided me access to conduct informal discussions with other Aboriginal students to assist in identifying potential collaborators. The etic position as a middle class adult with measurable success in post secondary education, presently training in academic research methods, provides me access to historic and contemporary academic trends and perspectives. The application of academic analytical tools to data to observe and "reach toward an appreciation of the emic structuring of that data," is an etic system (p. 146). This etic system includes observing and describing physical events or characteristics in isolation. In this case, I have focused on services offered specifically to Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta.

In this thesis, I explore the perceptions of Aboriginal students in relation to those services, in the hope of moving towards an understanding of "the emic structuring of that data" (p. 146). As Pike explains, each of these views can be distinct, be restricted in scope and lead to a kind of distortion (p. 144).

Understanding My Bias

Most valuable to my education in this area have been fellow Aboriginal student peers, who, on occasion, will make explicit the colonial or assimilated source of some of my past assumptions. Not all of these moments have been comforting. It can be unsettling to find that a lifetime of acculturation had distorted one's perspective of reality. Attributing my own ease of institutional navigation to other Aboriginal students is a false assumption and speaks of that place of near total cognitive assimilation into mainstream society from which I began University studies. As I have come to understand that place, I have ventured towards a new understanding of what it means to be an Aboriginal person today. My experiences are those of a contemporary Aboriginal adult. I am coming to understand that my social position is heavily influenced by and results from societal intervention. This position can be seen as a result of state and capitalist bureaucracies driven by European ideologies that endeavored to civilize, acculturate, and assimilate indigenous peoples. The majority of people indigenous to Turtle Island can claim experience with such intervention.

The combination of my reunion with people from my First Nation, and tutelage from respected indigenous knowledge holders, has provided a door leading to a reality remarkably different from my mainstream institutional assumptions. Having gazed through the door, and being invited through, the reality experienced upon accepting that invitation, is one removed from attributing social blame. Time spent with indigenous people, time spent learning an indigenous language, and time spent in indigenous ceremony have enabled me to fan the embers of an Aboriginal spirit and come to a

relative understanding of what it means to be an indigenous person. These experiences have revealed occasional evidence that views of mainstream society by Aboriginal individuals can be as distorted as mainstream views of Aboriginal peoples.

Understanding of this position (which is separate from my agreement with it) comes easily. As one brief example, I find myself defending my adopted parents in response to claims by some Aboriginal individuals that all Eurocentric ideologies are completely unjust. The family oriented, loving, nurturing environment of my childhood, and mentorship during my youth regarding how to navigate institutions, can be viewed as the essence of self-determination. Such critique sees the emphasis on the individual at the expense of the community; however the human aspects of church and school communities played a significant role in my childhood. I have been given blessings from my adopted parents to explore Aboriginal reality, and in those blessings are hints of regret that they did not expose me to that reality during my time with them. Yet that was a different time and they had no exposure themselves.

I have revealed much of my personal history in this preface. My intent in doing so is to support my claim to have approached this research from multiple positions. In the application of the duality of etic and emic positions, Pike suggests this can lead to an exciting depth of understanding.

> It is my contention that both views must be brought to the fore if any event is to be well understood. …But just as two pictures taken at a distance a few inches apart have no interesting differences when viewed one at a time, but when seen simultaneously through a stereoscope produces a three-dimensional experience, so behavior studied

simultaneously through these two approaches is seen in much more exciting depth of understanding (Pike, 1957, p. 144).

Assumptions

The dual positional approach may lead to unconscious assumptions being applied to results. Declaring my biases and assumptions upon entering into the research at the outset is intended to make them explicit so that data analysis may proceed in an honest and transparent fashion. It is in relation to these assumptions that I present my findings in the conclusion of this thesis. I found this unconventional method of presenting my analysis and findings very beneficial in coming to my own understanding of the degree to which these assumptions overtly influenced my analysis of what the participants were saying. Listed are five assumptions that I have identified at the outset of the research project.

i) ***There are individuals currently attending the university who are well versed in indigenous knowledge and traditional methodologies*** (Kawagley, 1995).
As I do not include myself within this description, I may be dramatizing or romanticizing the existence of such individuals. However, through existing personal relationships it has become evident to me that there are individuals within the university who have been raised within indigenous communities, have understanding of traditional protocol, and claim an indigenous language as their first language. It seems to me that these traits are the surface of a deeper indigenous ontology.

ii) ***The individuals who are well versed in indigenous knowledge and traditional methodologies will talk and share their stories with me.***

Observation of protocol played an important part in this assumption. Viewing the participants as giving me the gift of their collaborations placed the concept of respect as foremost in our relationship. Full explanations of my intentions began each of our relationships in this research. Respecting their wishes and demonstrating reciprocity is a high priority. Personal ethical considerations regarding my intentions and growing understandings of indigenous philosophy of respect and reciprocity require careful contemplation (Lightning, 1992).

iii) ***The residual effects of colonialism such as the residential school experience and the child welfare generations (1960's & 70's scoop) have disrupted the inter-generational transfer of indigenous knowledge*** (Smith, M. 2004, LaFrance, 2006). This assumption stems from my lived experience and may become evident elsewhere throughout the research process.

iv) ***The goals and priorities of some Aboriginal students may not align with the goals and priorities of the University.***

Family and community responsibilities may also be a factor for Aboriginal students in determining priorities and the goals and expectations from University attendance. Some Aboriginal students may view the educational experience at the University at best, less of a priority, and at worst, threatening to their cultural, spiritual and psychological selves (Hampton, 1995; Kawagley, 1995).

v) The institutional perspective of the benefits of a University education should be self-evident.

Speaking to pending tuition increases in 2001, the U of A Provost and Vice President (Academic), Doug Owram, explained the benefits of University education in terms of economic investment:

> Every study we've seen shows that the investment is still worth it and that the long-term benefits of a university degree are so dramatically higher than any other form of education, that the money does come back many times over aside from the other benefits you gain," he added. "And it's crucial that we have a high quality degree that is kept up-to-date, kept relevant and competitive in the market place with other institutions (McMaster & Brasen, 2001).

There is plenty of research available showing the economic benefits of University education. Below is a relevant quotation from research demonstrating those economic benefits in Aboriginal graduates:

> Aboriginals with postsecondary education do just as well, if not better, than non-Aboriginals with a postsecondary education. Other research has also found that as the educational outcomes of Aboriginals improve, income differentials between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians decline (Walters, White & Maxim, 2004, p. 284).

Why, then aren't there more Aboriginal students at the University? Social inequality affects Aboriginal people in Canada and education attainment levels can be demonstrated as a factor. It is not the only factor. Barriers to Aboriginal social inclusiveness exist structurally and culturally in society and at the University. The services provided for Aboriginal students at the University are designed to assist them in overcoming such barriers and gaining access to the demonstrated benefits of postsecondary education. The benefits of postsecondary education can be thought of as self evident to people in society that have referential experience. However, the Canadian Aboriginal experience and the

perspectives on postsecondary education that stem from those experiences may not be as well understood.

The next chapter outlines the research focus including the rationale and context of services offered to Aboriginal students in postsecondary education and the responses by the University of Alberta.

Chap 1. Introduction and the Research Question

Research Focus

> To provide a university environment which will encourage full access, participation and success for Aboriginal students. (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13.1)

It is this stated goal of the University of Alberta that this research investigated. The objective was to investigate the opinions and feelings of current Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta in relation to the areas targeted by the University in providing access and benefit of its services by Aboriginal students. The purpose is to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal students, which can inform the effectiveness of those services in relation to the priorities of Aboriginal students. In addition to informing the University to better its performance in this area, this research is potentially able to support the University in its desire to "enrich and broaden its intellectual and cultural environment" (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13)

The question that originated and subsequently drove my research circles around the link between graduation and achievement. I was very curious in investigating this link with current Aboriginal students. What does achievement mean to them? What goals do they hope to achieve at the University? How did they view their experiences at the University? Have the services offered at the University of Alberta helped them? This last question includes aspects of support for Aboriginal identity where appropriate.

The chosen method of investigation is accessing versions of personal experience through the semi-structured interview format, to probe each participant's "thoughts … perceptions, feelings and perspectives" (Wellington, 2000, p.71).

Of the University's three main areas of concern regarding Aboriginal students; recruitment, retention and graduating, this research specifically focused on investigating the factors involved in the area of retention, and the extent to which current University Aboriginal students are aware of, or recognize such support. The area of focus was to identify the goals and desires of currently enrolled Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta and their motivations to achieve those goals. These were investigated through exploring those experiential factors that have either encouraged or inhibited these goals. Although focusing upon experiences in relation to retention initiatives, questions regarding the factors leading to their enrollment at the University was also be explored.

Rationale

The percentage of all Aboriginal people in Canada with a University degree is 6.3% (Statistics Canada, 2001). This is considerably lower than the 18% of non-Aboriginal people in Canadian society who have earned a University degree (Statistics Canada, ibid). As populations increase, this gap continues to get larger (Government of Canada, 2007, p. 6). Aboriginal organizations, Federal and Provincial governments and the University of Alberta all recognize this discrepancy. The priority of reducing the gap varies from crucial to crisis, depending upon which report is read.

In addressing the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs in 2006, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief, Phil Fontaine, demonstrated the false optimism of the Government of Canada towards closing this gap. He recalled that in 2000, the Auditor-General of Canada was optimistic that progress was being made towards decreasing this gap, and estimated that in 27 years the First Nations would reach parity in academic achievement with non-Aboriginal Canadians. However, four years later the Auditor-General's office issued a new estimate of years towards parity; 28 years from 2004 (Assembly of First Nations, 2006). Grand Chief Fontaine accurately observed that the Auditor-General not only appears to be denying the widening of the gap, but in providing evidence of the increasing gap, his office somehow interprets that as evidence of progress. The existence of the gap is not being contested. It is the widening of the gap that is interpreted as a crisis in Aboriginal education. Recognized by Aboriginal organizations and mainstream institutions alike, an urgent need exists for improved opportunity for Aboriginal peoples and communities in Canada. An area of focus for increased opportunity is access to postsecondary education.

The improvement of educational opportunities for Aboriginal peoples has also been identified as a crucial priority in other recent government reports concerning Aboriginal policy. Specifically, the *Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 3; Gathering Strength* (1996c), and *Strengthening Relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy* (2000). These reports recognize the widening gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational attainment and they make recommendations towards

reducing the discrepancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in both educational participation and attainment.

The goal of the University of Alberta Senate to reduce this disparity is stated in the *Aboriginal Strategies Task Force Report* (2002), "the Aboriginal strategies developed by the University will directly correspond to current governmental priorities" (p. 5), towards reducing "the discrepancy in level of educational attainment between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal populations, and thus improve the economic outlook for Aboriginal people and communities" (p. 4).

Limitations of the Data

Over the past twenty-five years, the University of Alberta has initiated various studies and projects in the realm concerning Aboriginal students. The general areas of concern are recruitment, retention and graduating students who self-identify as being Aboriginal (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13). Reasoning and justifications for targeting Aboriginal peoples for greater participation at the University is generally provided by statistical references indicating that as Aboriginal populations increase in society, the Aboriginal population at the University level is below comparative demographics of non-Aboriginal people (Richards & Vining, 2004). Examples of such statistical measurements will be provided in the following section, beginning with national statistics followed by statistics from the University of Alberta, to contextually locate the present position of Aboriginal post-secondary students overall as compared to non-Aboriginal students.

Introducing statistical data and analysis regarding Aboriginal peoples in Canada requires a cautionary note. The majority of quantitative data is cited either originally or from other subsequent research and analysis from Statistics Canada Censuses and Surveys, and their post-censual reports. As with Aboriginal student demographics gleaned from University Registrar offices, such information is dependent upon respondents volunteering to self-identify, as falling within an offered category of Aboriginal peoples. A variety of reasons exist that imply that limitations of data presented require careful consideration.

The provision of specific definitions of Aboriginal categories is relatively new in Canada. The repatriation of the Canadian *Constitution Act (1982)* provides that "Aboriginal peoples of Canada includes the Indian, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada" (Part II, sec. 35.2). Prior to this publicized event, individuals may not have self-identified as Aboriginal because they did not fit the category of Indian as defined in the *Indian Act*, Sec. 92. Attribution of a portion of the increase in Aboriginal population shown in the 1991 and 1996 Census is due to this wider definition of Aboriginal to include Inuit and Métis peoples. Therefore, noted increases in levels of educational attainment of Aboriginal people, has been suggested as being attributed to the increase in already educated individuals newly "identifying" as Aboriginal rather than existing Aboriginal individuals attaining more education (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Guimond, 2003). Also, previous to the 1996 Census, respondents were asked about their Aboriginal "origin." This was recognized for the limitation of individuals who did not "identify" themselves as an Aboriginal person, yet recognizing a distant relative as being

Aboriginal, and therefore responding as being of Aboriginal "origin." In 1996, these questions were rephrased to include "identity" (Mendelson & Battle, 1999, p.7).

A final consideration important when using official Aboriginal statistics from Census reports is that "First Nations have been known, for political reasons, to refuse to participate in census taking" (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998, p. 8; Beavon and Cooke, 2003). Statistics Canada acknowledges and refers to the First Nations communities where they were not permitted to enumerate and where the data collected are considered inaccurate, as "incompletely enumerated Indian Reserves and Indian settlements" (Statistics Canada 1996 Census, Special Notes, #7). Within the limitations of quantitative research into Aboriginal demographics, distinctive trends do emerge, as demonstrated in the following section.

Demonstrating the Gap

Four previous Canadian censuses provide a broad overview of University post-secondary educational attainment between Aboriginal students compared to the non-Aboriginal population.

Canada Census	% of Aboriginal pop. with University degree	% of non-Aboriginal pop. with University degree	Gap
1981	2.0 %	8.1 %	6.1%
1991	2.6 %	11.6 %	9%
1996	4.2 %	15.5 %	11.3%
2001	6.3 %	18 %	11.7%

Fig.1 (Statistics Canada)

The above data, beginning from 1981, was selected for presentation here because it contextualizes the time frame of when the University of Alberta initiated development of support services for Aboriginal students. It also demonstrates the widening gap. These and similar statistics indicate that an Aboriginal person in Canada is very unlikely to receive a University degree.

> A report published by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, entitled *University Education and Economic Well-being: Indian Achievement and Prospects* (1990) claims that, based on the 1986 census, non-Indians were three times more likely than Indians to attend University and seven times more likely to graduate with a degree; only 23% of Indians who complete high school will attend university while 33% of non-Aboriginal high school graduates will attend; 6.2% of the Aboriginal population attempt university and only 1.3% earn a degree; about 25% of Indians who attend University earn a degree compared with 55% of non-Indians (as cited in Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000, pp. 16, 17).

In 2001, Statistics Canada initiated an Aboriginal Peoples Survey which provided a more detailed picture of the state of Aboriginal peoples participation in post-secondary education. The findings concurred with earlier Census findings that Aboriginal people in Canada are less likely than non-Aboriginal people to complete post-secondary education. The results indicate that while more Aboriginal people are completing some form of post-secondary education (college, trade or university), the bigger increase in non-Aboriginal people completing has increased the gap. The gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal graduation rates decreased slightly between 1996 and 2001, when including all postsecondary programs such as college and trade schools.

> In 1996, for every 100 non-Aboriginal people aged 25 to 44 with a post-secondary diploma or degree, there were 68 Aboriginal people. By 2001, this ratio had increased slightly to 71 Aboriginal people for every 100 non-Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada, 2001). [5]

The increases in Aboriginal post-secondary completions (and therefore this demonstrated decrease in the gap,) are largely observed in the non-university sector. When college, trade schools and other postsecondary programs are removed, and University completions are looked at independently, the gap is increasing. Although more Aboriginals are earning University degrees than previously, the rate of increase is below non-Aboriginal University graduates, which is an increase in the gap (Fig. 1). The next section examines Aboriginal student demographics at the University of Alberta.

The University of Alberta Registrar's office recently released a Summary of Statistics - Academic Year 2006/2007 that included categories of Aboriginal student enrollments. Table 15.1 of that report indicated 937 self-identifying Aboriginal students enrolled. This represents 1.9 % of the 49,748 total students enrolled in the 2006/2007 academic year. Statistics Canada reported that in the 2001 census that 4.4% of the Canadian population reported as having some Aboriginal ancestry. The regional breakdown indicated the Aboriginal portion of Alberta's total population was 5.3%. These percentages indicate that the Aboriginal student population at the University of Alberta is 57% below parity with the national Aboriginal segment of society and 64% below parity with the Aboriginal segment of Alberta's overall population.

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[5] In this case, the post-secondary gap is measured by taking the ratio of the Aboriginal post-secondary (college, trade and university) completion rate to the non-Aboriginal rate. The closer the ratio is to 100, the narrower than gap between the two groups (Statistics Canada, 2001, footnote #8).

Generally, University achievements are measured statistically in representation of numbers of students admitted, currently enrolled, and finally graduating. Within each of these areas the likelihood of an Aboriginal student to be admitted and complete to graduation has been identified as statistically lower than other demographics of categories of non-Aboriginal students. The following chart is an example of these types of statistical presentations:

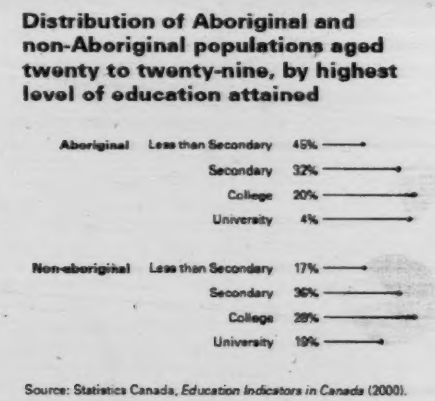

Fig. 2 (University of Alberta: Senate Task Force Report, 2000, p. 11).

There is value in such data collection if recognized trends lead to some form of adjustment or intervention. Institutional adjustments to policy and services may be seen in this light. Increasing the representation of Aboriginal peoples in all segments of Canadian society to equitable demographics appears as a common goal of institutions such as the University of Alberta and Aboriginal peoples and their organizations. For example, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) submission to the First Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders Meeting in Kelowna, B.C. in November 2005 was a *First Nations Implementation Plan* (AFN, 2005). That document stated goals of addressing

conditions that contribute to poverty and ensuring that Aboriginal peoples "benefit more fully from, and contribute to, Canada's prosperity" (pg. 1).

In response to the low Aboriginal participation at the University of Alberta, the institution has made adjustment to policy and services. Increasing Aboriginal representation in areas of student enrollment and staff membership are expected outcomes. These areas have been targeted to measure the success of the University in providing access to their services by the Aboriginal segment of society (University Senate, Final Task Force Report on Access to Post-Secondary Education, 2000). This particular focus has resulted in policy, programming and services specifically designed for the benefit of and to assist Aboriginal students. The following policy statements from the University General Faculties Council Policy Manual are responses to the under representation of Aboriginal peoples at the University. These statements briefly include reasons and justifications for targeting Aboriginal students' participation at the University. They are included here because they provide a concise summary of the position held by the University that remains consistent throughout the development and delivery of programs and services for Aboriginal students.

> The University of Alberta has heightened its efforts to increase the number of Aboriginal people on campus and to facilitate the success of Aboriginal students generally. Recognizing that the enhanced participation of Aboriginal people enriches and broadens its intellectual and cultural environment, the University remains committed to the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of Aboriginal descent.
>
> In fulfilling its commitment, the University of Alberta seeks through the following policy to address the right of Aboriginal people to access, and to

> receive appropriate support for, a university education. The issue of access and support for Aboriginal students requires special attention because of the barriers that have been created by political, historical and socio-economic circumstances. (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13)

These two statements express official recognition of the need of appropriate support for Aboriginal students attending the University. In addressing the right of Aboriginal people to access a University education, the policy states special attention is required. I would like to point out that the only reference to culture is the benefit to the University cultural environment. If Aboriginal people accept what the University is offering, can they expect specific and culturally appropriate support? Stemming from this position are the following stated goals regarding Aboriginal students:

> 1. To provide a university environment which will encourage full access, participation and success for Aboriginal students.
>
> 2. To enrich all aspects of the intellectual and cultural life of the University through increased participation of Aboriginal students. (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13.1)

It is the first goal that this research investigates. Stemming from the Aboriginal Student Policy statement of commitment to "the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of Aboriginal descent" (op. cit., 108.13), the first goal of the policy is "full access, participation and success for Aboriginal students" (op. cit., 108.13.1). The interview questions within this research probed Aboriginal students for their concepts and opinions of achievement and the validity of the above interpretation of success as graduation and/or visa-versa through probing Aboriginal students for their concepts and opinions of achievement. The goal of enriching the University environment, may be considered a

logical outcome if the first goal is satisfied through support of culturally appropriate Aboriginal services.

The accountability of the institution to its many stakeholders requires measurement of the outcomes and effectiveness of its programs and services towards achieving, or at least moving towards fulfillment of its stated goals. The University views graduation as success. Therefore the success of the Aboriginal students currently enrolled at the University is measured by graduation rates. Naturally, these measurements are produced through quantitative research and are the same type of statistics that originally demonstrated the need for specialized programs and services for Aboriginal students. Despite such policy, programming and services in place, we have yet to observe any dramatic movement towards the desired outcomes of reducing the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participation at the University of Alberta. While quantitative data is common for measuring existing conditions, and in this case, demonstrates the under representation of Aboriginal peoples in post-secondary education, it offers no suggestions into reasons for the measurable imbalances.

The following section provides a brief overview of claims or statements made in literature and media, which demonstrate the viewpoint of Aboriginal people and organizations in regard to the continuing educational attainment gap. These ideas and attributions point to many different aspects and divulge the complexity of the issue.

Aboriginal Perspectives

To the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the gap in educational attainment "cannot be ascribed to First Nation students failing within the system, but rather, the system failing First Nation students". The organization is concerned that "based on current rates of attainment, it is expected that the PSE *(post-secondary education)* gap will worsen and that this will have growing consequences for the future of Canada's economy" (Assembly of First Nations, 2006. as cited in *No Higher Priority: Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada*, 2007, p. 17). (*Italics mine*).

The Assembly of First Nations takes the position that "education is one such area that holds tremendous promise for a new and better future" (AFN, 2005, p. 8), however, as the above statement indicates, they bluntly attribute the gap to the way education is delivered in Canada. The implication is that First Nations students do not fit well within the existing education system. The University of Alberta Senate Task Force on Access to Post-secondary Education (2000) appears to agree with the AFN. In their final report they observe that Aboriginal students tend to pursue post-secondary education later in life. The report also recognizes the lack of Aboriginal mentors and culture at the University. These two factors suggest that the educational delivery paradigm that has satisfied the needs of non-Aboriginal Canadian youth at the University of Alberta for nearly one hundred years requires adjustment if it is to succeed in increasing Aboriginal participation (University of Alberta, 2000, p. 10).

Recent qualitative research has explored reasons for similar imbalances in educational attainment with Aboriginal high school students (Steinhauer, 1999) and comparatively low Aboriginal participation in a University Faculty of Arts (Hampton & Roy, 2002). The addition of this type of research has been beneficial in understanding the experience of Aboriginal high school students in the former and Arts faculty and their Aboriginal students in the latter. The current research is undertaken to extend these to the experiences of current Aboriginal University students.

Oscar Kawagley stated that his University graduate study, "has been from the perspective of the Western middle-class intellectuals' world, which differs markedly from the Yupiaq's *(indigenous peoples in Alaska)* perspective and consciousness (Kawagley, 1995, p. 146, *italics mine*). Kawagley continued through University programs aware that his involvement at the University may affect his involvement in his indigenous community. What were the factors and decisions that brought Kawagley to University graduate studies? Was the university institution helpful in his adjustment to academic life among the Western middle-class intellectuals' world? Was his indigenous epistemology ever compromised in his course of studies? It was these types of questions that I hoped to explore as I entered into this investigation with current Aboriginal students. It seemed likely that the attitudes of indigenous students at the University of Alberta might not fit into the assumption that graduation is their primary goal. This research sought to uncover this type of information.

> Aboriginal students are often left with the feeling that the post-secondary education system generally does not work for them, and they tend to approach

> the university with a sense of foreboding (Lewis Cardinal as quoted in: University of Alberta, 2000, p. 10).

Aboriginal students, particularly those who are members of First Nations, still hold mistrust of formal education due to the legacy of First Nations educational policies in Canada (Hampton & Roy, 2002). The impacts of the residential school experience are still felt in the descendants of the survivors of those schools (Haig-Brown, 1988: Battiste, 2004). It may be reasonable to suggest that as First Nations students progress through formal institutional education; their priorities differ from their non-Aboriginal peers.

The historic efforts of the institution to retain Aboriginal students, although improving, have a poor track record. The University views Aboriginal students who have left their programs incomplete as evidence of its failure to retain them. This research investigates the goals of currently enrolled Aboriginal students and their views regarding achievement, with the potential to inform the University to better its performance in this area. As indigenous peoples, Aboriginal students might not share the institutional perspective of measuring their achievements at the University by their increased earning potential.

Justifications

Reasons for an institution such as the University of Alberta to focus upon the measurable success of Aboriginal peoples' University experience are many and varied. They include i) assimilative (integrative) ideologies, ii) multicultural education and iii) a response to

societal pressure including faculty members and Aboriginal communities calling for a better response to the low Aboriginal enrolment (societal accountability).

Existing research correlating the level of educational attainment and earning capacity demonstrates that more formal educational achievement results in more earning potential (Richards & Vining, 2004). Enabling more Aboriginal people the opportunity to increase their earning potential, thus reducing their dependency upon government subsidies, is one ideological justification for supporting Aboriginal students (Flanagan, 2000).

A multicultural ideological reason for supporting Aboriginal University students emerges from an irony in Canadian society. New immigrant students of cultural backgrounds different than the dominant segment of society (Western European descendants) fare better in Canadian University graduation success than Canadian Aboriginal students (Reitz, 2001). When Aboriginal Canadians are categorized as one of many minorities within Canadian society, and postsecondary achievements are compared to those of other minorities, the results are still found wanting. The goal of increasing Aboriginal University participation is not only parity within overall Canadian society, but also parity within the abstract categorizations of multiculturalism. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that the "defenders of Canada's approach to multiculturalism argue that it encourages integration" (Dewing & Leman, 2006, p. 11).

These are two assimilative rationales for the University's focus upon the Aboriginal students. They can be found in the University of Alberta's Chancellor's first communiqué

to the University community following his recent appointment; "The challenges of integrating Aboriginal people into Canadian society are complex and they need all of us working together" (Newell, 2005). Assimilative objectives for the "integration" of indigenous people into the institutional paradigm did not have success in Indian residential schools, and appear to be unsuccessful in increasing Aboriginal participation at the University. The original idea of this research project was to connect the Chancellor's 2005 statement of "integrating Aboriginal people into Canadian society," and Harold Cardinal's 1969 observational statement that "integration seems to be a one way street…always it is the Indian who must integrate into the white environment, never the other way around" (Cardinal, 1969, p. 57).

However, reasons for supporting the Aboriginal student need not always be as integrative as I have suggested above. In referring to the economic benefits of educational achievements, the First Nations themselves have stated this as a reason for their encouragement of their membership into post-secondary education (Hampton & Roy, 2002; AFN, 2005). There are other more substantive reasons. Educating for social justice through a decolonizing effort (Smith, 1999) that respects and celebrates indigenous knowledges (Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg (2000) is gaining strength in some University faculty ideologies. In the University of Alberta's Aboriginal student policy and goal statements there is recognition of the benefits of cross-cultural sensitivity for appropriate and culturally relevant pedagogy. This recognition can be supportive of Aboriginal University students if the appropriate and culturally relevant pedagogies and environments are realized. In supporting Aboriginal students in this manner, the

University's desire to "enrich and broaden its intellectual and cultural environment" (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13) is also realized.

Current supportive efforts at the University level can take on meaning in an emancipatory sense (Battiste, 2004), and also fall within goals of societal accountability. This can occur when educators take the history of Aboriginal education efforts in Canada into account, and recognize the failure to produce value to Aboriginal peoples in that history.

Equally important to the University are the issues of recruitment and graduation. In investigating how University enrolment fits within the personal goals and ideas of achievement of current students, some reflections regarding how the participants have come to the University have emerged. The outcomes of this investigation into retention of Aboriginal students can be seen as investigating the eventual graduation of Aboriginal students. However, this study does not assume that graduation is the goal of University study. The focus of this research is to investigate Aboriginal students' perspectives in relation to those services offered, in order to gain a better understanding of the measured enrolment and graduation imbalances. The research is seeking the experiential factors in relation to Aboriginal services and programs at the University that either encourage or inhibit these goals. The outcomes of the data analysis are recommendations for improvement of service, which may inform the University how to better serve its Aboriginal students.

This research has the potential to assist the University in its desire to "enrich and broaden its intellectual and cultural environment" (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13) if the outcomes identify specific areas where transformative action can take place to either replicate and/or reduce the experiential factors that either encourage or inhibit these goals.

Contextualizing the historic relationship between Aboriginal peoples and institutional education in Canada is necessary if we are to better understand the gap between percentages of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, and appreciate the perspectives of the current Aboriginal postsecondary students. The next chapter will provide a broad overview of the historical background of the Aboriginal educational experience in Canada.

Chap 2. Context and Literature Review

> The old story (of education) is one of destruction and pain, while the emerging one is that of the ongoing vitality of Aboriginal people, from whose experience we can learn. (Battiste, M., in Castellano, et al. 2000, p. ix).

To understand the experience of today's Aboriginal student, the relevance of their family and community's experience with post-secondary education is an important factor and one that is often overlooked. This chapter historically contextualizes both the placement of today's Aboriginal students, and the Aboriginal programs and services offered at the University. The educational experiences of the communities from which today's Aboriginal students originate is relevant to the level of support received and their formulation of attitudes and expectations entering University. Therefore the experiences of contemporary Aboriginal students should be contextualized within the historical backdrop of Aboriginal education in Canada. In this chapter, a historical overview is followed by a brief review of the literature regarding Aboriginal education and government relations including residential schools, Indian control of Indian Education, the Canadian Dream and Aboriginal identity. The chapter concludes with brief descriptions of those Aboriginal programs and services at the University of Alberta with which our participants have direct experience.

Throughout the history of formal education, educated people who could afford it have made arrangements for their children to be educated at some particular institution. It was in the latter half of the 19th century that the idea of free public education was championed in Canada by Egerton Ryerson, the Superintendent of Education in Upper Canada in

1844, who proposed and implemented the Ontario Public School System. He "believed that schooling was important and that it should not be the privilege of certain classes of society" (Ell, 2002, para. 9). When the Province of Alberta joined the Confederation in 1905, the jurisdiction of public education became the responsibility of the new provincial government as outlined under the terms of Confederation. However, under the terms of the Treaties, the federal government remained responsible for the education of Aboriginal students. Today public education has evolved to the point where it is now commonplace to assume that every person has had equal opportunity to benefit from formal academic training. This is not so with Aboriginal peoples.

Aboriginal Education and Government Relations

With the passage of the British North America Act (1867) and the Indian Act (1876), the new Federal Government of Canada assumed control over all Indian affairs from various Superintendents in the fragmented colonial departments such as Secretary of State of Canada and British Indian Department. In all previous concerns from state authorities, relations with Aboriginal peoples were only necessary for either military or trade alliances (Wilson, 1986, p. 65) or removing Aboriginal title to the land (Richardson, 1991, p. 26). These pieces of legislation, particularly the Indian Acts (1869, 1876) are admittedly designed to facilitate the civilizing and assimilation of the First Nations and peoples (Armitage, 1995; Barman, Hebert & McCaskill, 1986). In fact, the title of the 1869 legislation regarding Indians is: *An Act for the gradual enfranchisement of Indians, the better management of Indian affairs, and to extend the provisions of the Act 31st Victoria, Chapter 42* (Government of Canada, 1869). The 1876 amendments to this

legislation also shortened the title to the *Indian Act* (Government of Canada, 1876). As the Indian Act defined the criteria of Indian status, those individuals and their communities (bands) who met the criteria found themselves as wards of the state, to be treated as minors without the privileges of citizenship (Cardinal, 1969, p. 19). Included in this legislation were strategies to facilitate the civilizing of those defined Indians. One such civilizing strategy through the ideology of assimilation is demonstrated in the requirements of enfranchisement (Indian Act, 1876, sec. 109-113). Enfranchisement was the removal of Indian individuals (and all their descendants) from the Indian Register, the official list of Indians maintained by the federal government (ibid). The prevailing ideology of the authors of these sections of the Indian Acts was to elevate the Indian from his barbarian, savage state (Wilson, 1986, pp. 65-66). Through this act of removal from the Indian register, the enfranchised individual was also removed from home community band membership list and lost the right to live with his family on the Indian Reserve (Indian Act, 1876, sec. 109-113). Some of the enfranchisement criteria were voluntary for Indian men. "They had to be over 21, able to read and write either English or French, be reasonably well educated, free of debt, and of good moral character as determined by a commission of non-Indian examiners" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, [RCAP] 1996, 1(5), para 2). Most of the provisions of enfranchisement were involuntary. Among such involuntary enfranchisement criteria were Indian females who married non-Indians, or Indians who lived outside Canada for five years or more. Completion of University education also meant involuntary enfranchisement:

> 86(1) Any Indian who may be admitted to the degree of Doctor of Medicine, or to any other degree by any University of Learning, or who may be admitted in any Province of

> the Dominion to practice law either as an Advocate or as a Barrister or Counsellor or Solicitor or Attorney or to be a Notary Public, or who may enter Holy Orders or who may be licensed by and denomination of Christians as a Minister of the Gospel, shall *ipso facto* become enfranchised under this Act (Indian Act, 1876).

The Indian with a University degree was no longer an Indian.

Enfranchisement was not viewed as beneficial by First Nations people of the time. "They, along with their children, would lose Indian status, the right to live in the reserve community, and even the right to treaty benefits or to inherit reserve land from family members" (RCAP, 1(9.3), para 7). Forced removal from Band membership lists and expulsion from their home communities was viewed correctly by First Nations peoples as an attack upon their culture and languages. Once enfranchised, they would be allowed to vote and pay taxes. Having to choose between the racism and open discrimination of mainstream Canadian society at the turn of the 20th century or the safety of reserve life, enfranchisement could hardly be seen as a good trade (Cardinal, 1969, p. 45). "It was not a realistic or popular policy among Indians, most of whom had no intention of renouncing their personal and group identity by assimilating into non-Aboriginal society (RCAP, 1(9.3), para 1).

Given that earning a university degree required involuntary enfranchisement earlier last century, it is easy to see how the First Nations communities and individuals viewed a university education as a detriment rather than a benefit. The fact that so many Indians did not pursue the option of enfranchisement may be interpreted to indicate that the benefits assumed by the original legislation, were not viewed as incentive at all by those

whom the legislation targeted. Inversely, the priority for Aboriginal peoples was the survival of family and community connections over gaining the Canadian franchise.

Residential Schools

The residential school experience has been well documented and does not require a full overview here, but cannot be ignored either. The implication of the collective experiences of Aboriginal people in relation to residential schools provides some important insights into Aboriginal educational initiatives.

Beginning in 1883 to the 1970's when most of the residential schools closed (the last federally run residential school closed in 1996) in Western Canada, the residential school era has been the most influential institutional experience in Canadian Aboriginal education.

> For over three hundred years, two of Canada's major institutions, the church and the government engaged in formal educational and missionary work among the Indians. Indian policy has always been geared towards assimilation of native people into the dominant society and schooling was seen as simply a part of that process. In fact, according to a 1930 Indian Affairs document, the educational institution was the prime source of civilizing, educating and Christianizing native people. The policy of "protection, civilization and assimilation" were recommended and put into effect. For most of that time period, residential schools were the main mechanism for implementing this policy so the Indian experience of schooling was an experience of residential schools (Bull, 1991, p. 13-14).

In her Master's thesis, Linda Bull captured two of the major themes of the residential school experience: 1) the collaboration of church and state 2) goals of civilizing and assimilation through the Christianization of Aboriginal children.

The civilizing and assimilative techniques employed were designed to remove culture, language and family bonds. The treatment of Aboriginal children and youth at these residential schools included instances of corporal punishment (in many of these cases, abuse). The methods employed are the source of recent collective litigations against church and state. They are also the reasons for formal apologies from churches (Frieson & Frieson, 2005). They are also the reason for the Federal Government's Statement of Reconciliation and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Both are part of the new federal policy addressed to the survivors of residential schools called *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* (Government of Canada, 1998).

Today, terms such as "schooling" and "educating" tends to invoke assumptions that academic knowledge was a primary focus of the residential schools. The "3 R's" (reading, 'riting & 'rithmetic) was certainly the focus of public education at the turn of the 20th century. Not so in the residential schools. The attending children were not being prepared academically. The most that was expected of the surviving, civilized Aboriginal youth was for them to enter mainstream society at the lower stratus of the socioeconomic order (Barman, 1986). Therefore the few hours of the week spent in the classroom were to receive minimal scholastic instruction with the majority of time spent preparing for a life of labour: vocational training and working around the school. Those that survived the

residential school experience were hardly prepared for post-secondary education entrance.

Other factors also influenced the lack of access to University education by Aboriginal peoples. Poverty, racism, segregation and oppression all resulted in a lack of motivation and inadequate preparation for University entrance. This was the situation of Aboriginal post-secondary education in Canada for the century 1870-1970. Understanding the challenges faced by today's Aboriginal youth preparing for postsecondary entrance must include contextualizing the legacy their parents and grandparents had to endure in Canadian society. Encouragement and realization of benefits of postsecondary education from family and community are very recent developments, if they occur at all.

> The roots of understanding are buried deep in First Nations history, usually thoughtlessly perpetuated by outside power brokers who see no need to understand the native point of view. The resultant disregard for, and manipulation of, native values are often propelled by an impatience for traditional (slower) ways which are seen to impede progress (Frieson & Frieson, 2005, p. 47).

Coming to this contextual understanding by Canadian institutions is also a recent development, if it occurs at all. The importance of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) becomes evident here. The extensive data collection by the research teams produced the contemporary voice of Aboriginal peoples in Canada to be heard by Canadian society. The contents of the Commission's reports are a long overdue recognition of the experiences of Aboriginal peoples in relation to Canadian society and its institutions. The federal action plan mentioned previously as resulting from the Commission's reports, is generally viewed as a positive and overdue response. This is a

contemporary occurrence. I'd like to return to a few decades ago when the voice of Aboriginal people began to be heard in Canada.

Indian Control of Indian Education

A measurable turning point in the Aboriginal voice being heard by Canadian society occurred in 1970 with a publication by Harold Cardinal representing the Indian Association of Alberta. *The Unjust Society* (1970) was a response to the 1969 Federal Department of Indian Affairs presentation of a white paper proposing the repeal of the Indian Act, and removing all federal responsibility to the First Nations and other Aboriginal groups in Canada. This white paper suggested disposing of all federal obligations stemming from the established treaties with the First Nations, including eliminating all lands reserved for Indians and divesting themselves of any educational responsibilities. In his response, Cardinal asserted strongly the oppressive nature of the federal treatment of the First Nations and stated points of recommendation. The point of relevance to this brief overview is the one that became a manifesto for Aboriginal peoples in Canada through the 1970's: "Indian Control of Indian Education" (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972).

The 1960's & 70's was a time when Aboriginal peoples across North America were organizing. The Indian Association of Alberta became the National Indian Brotherhood, which became what we know today as the Assembly of First Nations. Aboriginal voices were being heard and Harold Cardinal's original proposition of Indian Control of Indian Education was being discussed and negotiated between Aboriginal communities and

postsecondary institutions. At the University of Alberta, the origin of programs and services for Aboriginal communities and students can be traced to some of these negotiations (University of Alberta Calendar, 2007-08, sec. 120).

Through these collaborations and investigations, the needs and dreams of Aboriginal people were expressed. Results can be seen in a variety of Aboriginal education initiatives, including postsecondary programs and services. It is important to observe that these types of postsecondary educational initiatives are not the only results from the increased awareness in Canadian society of the historically unjust relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the state. Far from being a completed project, the effects of raising awareness of the experiences of Aboriginal peoples have made possible specific initiatives that can be seen as moving towards Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education.

The reality of contemporary Aboriginal people as part of a modern society is not lost in any of the struggles and articulations of the meaning of Aboriginal education. The National Indian Brotherhood summed it nicely in 1972:

> What we want for our children can be summarized very briefly: to reinforce their Indian identity [and] to provide the training necessary for making a good living in modern society (p. 3).

The Canadian Dream

Training to make a good (Christian) living can be seen in the residential school initiative throughout the last century. The preparation of all the students to make a good living is commonly stated as one of the benefits of a University education. One can hardly argue against statistics that indicate unemployment rates of 9% for adults with a University degree compared to unemployment rates as high as 40% for adults without a high school diploma (Armstrong, et al, 1990).

In her article *Self-Management and Self-Direction in the Success of Native Literacy Learners*, (2003) Christianna Jones makes the point that Aboriginal individuals pursuing the "Canadian Dream" by buying into the system and "playing by the rules" and by making "good life choices," (p. 46) are expressing self-management and self-direction. That Canadian dream refers to the high standard of living the majority of middle-class Canadians enjoys including a career oriented job, ability to buy a house, access to good schools, quality health care, etc. The University offers opportunity to pursue that Canadian dream. However, for Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the self-management and self-direction to which Jones refers, requires the ability to maintain a healthy self-identity.

Educational success has been linked to self-esteem and a positive outlook for the future (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1995). Then, if it is accepted that students who have a healthy self-identity will perform better in educational settings, the challenge is to "develop learning conditions that will enhance student self-identity as a means of maximizing student learning" (Frieson & Frieson, 2005, p. 155). It is the reinforcement and maintenance of

Aboriginal identity that appears as the new dimension in the contemporary Aboriginal education project. This suggests that institutional support towards the healthy self-identity of the Aboriginal student is a requirement for that student's educational success.

Aboriginal Identity

The question whether programs and services at the University of Alberta are providing support for Aboriginal self-identity was part of this research. I began this project seeking to ask Aboriginal students if they felt supported in their Aboriginal identity at the University. From my own experiences, I tend to agree with Marie Battiste when she states:

> Educators are challenged to unravel stereotypical assumptions and theories entangled in cognitive imperialism – the persisting ideologies from our colonial past that remain part of our educational systems (Battiste, 1995, p. ix).

This is not to say that educators aren't responding to this challenge. Today we recognize Aboriginal communities and individuals are changing the direction of the Eurocentric, colonial experience that has been felt coast to coast by Aboriginal people in their relation to institutional education. Initiatives such as Blue Quills First Nations College in St. Paul, Alberta and the First Nations University headquartered in Regina, Saskatchewan are but two western Canadian examples of Aboriginal educators at the post-secondary level assuming control of Aboriginal education in a culturally supportive Aboriginal environment.

The increases in Aboriginal participation in postsecondary programs have been attributed to many different factors. In 2000, Cathy Richardson and Natasha Blanchette-Cohen published a *Survey of Post-Secondary Education Programs in Canada for Aboriginal Peoples*. They listed several contributing elements. These include:

- The establishment of new university-based programs for Aboriginal students initially in education, law and preparatory programs and now extending to other areas such as health, and the introduction of Native Studies programs in existing institutions;
- On-campus support services and facilities for students including counselors, tutors, liaison personnel and resident Elders;
- Partnerships between Aboriginal communities and post-secondary institutions which offer 'community-based' educational programs in those communities;
- Modification of admission protocols especially in Aboriginal specific programs;
- Increase in federal funding for Aboriginal students.

(Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000, pp. 18-19)

These points can be recognized as supporting that new dimension in the contemporary Aboriginal education project. The reinforcement of Aboriginal identity is stated explicitly in mission statements of both Blue Quills College and the First Nations University. It is not, however, mentioned in the documentation for the University of Alberta. The current research may provide insight into the extent to which policies at the University of Alberta supports Aboriginal identity. Opinions where gathered from current Aboriginal students as to whether or not the programs and services at the University are responding to such needs. The following section outlines the specific programs and services at the University of Alberta that resulted from the changing nature of the relationship between Canadian institutions and Aboriginal peoples since 1972.

Aboriginal Programs and Services in the University of Alberta

Program and Services Development Milestones at the University of Alberta:

- 1973 - Aboriginal Student Council
  (Originally the Native Student Club)

- 1975 - Aboriginal Student Services Centre (ASSC)
  (Originally Office of the Advisor on Native Affairs & Office of Native Student Services)

- 1978 - General Faculties Council (GFC) Committee on Native Studies

- 1985 - Transition Year Program (TYP) Program
  (Originally Coordinated University Transfer (CUT))

- 1986 - Faculty of Native Studies
  (Originally the School of Native Studies)

- 1988 - Aboriginal Health Care Careers Program

- 1990 - GFC Aboriginal Student Policy:
  (Enrollment target of 5% for Aboriginal students established)

- 1990 - Indigenous Law Program

- 1996 - Graduate Program in Indigenous Peoples Education
  (Originally First Nations Education)

- 1998 - University of Alberta Aboriginal Council (UAAC)
  (Council of Aboriginal programs)

- 2000 - Canadian Indigenous Languages & Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI)

- 2001 - Aboriginal Capacity and Developmental Research Environments (ACADRE)

- 2001 - Aboriginal Strategies Task Force
  (Formed by the Provost and Vice-President *(Academic)*)

- 2002 - Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP)

The above comprehensive list of development milestones of Aboriginal programs and services at the University of Alberta outlines the relatively short history of the specific

focus by the University on service to Aboriginal peoples. It should be noted here that each of the programs or services has acquired its funding or has accountability to different sources. There is no single office, board or committee responsible for delivery of Aboriginal programs or services. The University of Alberta Aboriginal Council (UAAC) is a representative council of all the Aboriginal programs and services on campus. UAAC member Dr. Malcolm King was explicit in his description that UAAC is a council of programs, not individuals. Each program has a voice; therefore, consensus is required (personal communication, Nov 2007). The autonomy of each Aboriginal program and service at the University supports egalitarian ideals and values; it also has the potential for lack of communication. I believe the UAAC was conceived to address this need, among others. Following are provided brief abstracts of some of those programs and services, which have a voice on the UAAC and are relevant to this research.

In 1972 representatives of the Indian Association of Alberta proposed to the University of Alberta Senate that an academic unit focusing on Native Studies be formed (University of Alberta Calendar, 2007-08, sec. 120). Following standard operating procedure, the Senate struck a task force to study the area of the University's relationship with Aboriginal peoples. Six years later the task force submitted their report to the Senate. This report included twenty recommendations "regarding improved service to Native people and a more coherent involvement in Native Studies" (University of Alberta, 2007). Also in 1978 the University's General Faculties Council (GFC) struck the standing committee on Native studies. This committee still includes members of Aboriginal communities at

large, along with University faculty and student representatives. After a period of research and consultation, this committee recommended the establishment of an autonomous school of Native Studies. "Though not parochial in its outlook on Native Studies, the Faculty would pay particular attention to Native peoples Indian, Inuit, and Métis of the Canadian West and North" (University of Alberta, 2007). From 1984 to 1988 approval of the establishment of School of Native Studies and the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Native Studies came from the legitimizing bodies at the University and the Government of Alberta. In 2006 the School was recognized as a Faculty at the University, thus legitimizing it on the same level as the other autonomous Faculties within the University community.

In 1973, a group of Aboriginal students initiated a Native Student Club at the University. Today we know it as the Aboriginal Student Council (ASC), an official representative body of Aboriginal students at the University. With a variety of social events, cultural celebrations and political forums, the ASC provides an environment in which to foster and maintain connections within the Aboriginal community on and off campus. The ASC lounge is a common gathering place of Aboriginal students (University of Alberta, 2006).

In 1975, as the Senate task force on Native Studies was researching the feasibility of a School of Native Studies, the Office of the Advisor on Indian Affairs was established. This office evolved through the 1970's into the Office of Native affairs, to Native Student Services in the 1980's. Today we know this office as the Aboriginal Student Service Centre, and it is responsible for administration of a variety of programs and services for prospective and current Aboriginal students. These include an entry-level program to

assist new students to adjust and familiarize themselves with the University environment called the Transition Year Program. The staff at the Aboriginal Student Services Centre also administers student-peer mentoring and tutoring programs and well as providing access to Aboriginal cultural resources.

Faculty members within the Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Policy Studies outlining the need for a graduate program of study to address the needs of Indigenous students, submitted a proposal to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) in 1995. Shortly thereafter, the First Nation Education specialization became available for MEd and PhD level students. With a recent name change to Indigenous Peoples Education, the specialization continues to address the need of preparation for higher-level participation in Education institutions by Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (ATEP) is an off-campus elementary teacher education program. It received funding support in 2002 and is administered through the Faculty of Education. The program is designed to increase the numbers of Aboriginal elementary school teachers, which is a strategy to improve access and success of Aboriginal children.

I would like to conclude this chapter with 2002 Honorary Doctorate recipient Douglas Cardinal. In his convocation address he referred to the UAAC vision of establishing an Aboriginal Lodge of Learning at the University of Alberta. Cardinal reinforced the need of communication between University leadership and Aboriginal peoples and their

communities "to work together toward a better and stronger relationship centered on respect and trust" (2002). Further in his convocation address, Cardinal linked the vision of the UAAC to an idea that has been active for four decades.

> In the late 1960's, I worked with all the Chiefs and the 52 First Nations in the Province of Alberta in developing an Aboriginal Education Centre. The Aboriginal Lodge of Learning, I believe, evolved from that initial vision and the opportunity I had years ago with the Aboriginal community reinforces the belief that there is a fundamental need, even more so for this facility today (2002).

Today the visioning process is still incomplete for such an Aboriginal Education Centre. The few Aboriginal programs and services that have impacted our participants through their direct experiences are not coordinated in any streamlined manner.

The abstracts presented above were selected from the list of programs and services development milestones for inclusion here because of the participants in this research have experience with these programs and services. Before we proceed to these experiences, the next chapter will outline my methodological considerations in selecting data gathering, analysis and representation.

Chap 3. Methodology

In my early considerations of a methodological paradigm that would suit this research project, the highest priority was given to accessing and revealing unmeasured descriptive data. I endeavored to investigate to what degree current University services for Aboriginal students have been influential in helping them towards and through University.

The quantitative results presented in the previous chapters in relation to my personal observations set the stage to the original research question. Statistics indicate the retention and graduation of Aboriginal students is lower than desirable (University of Alberta, 2007, Summary of Statistics; Statistics Canada, Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001). If increasing the participation of Aboriginal students is the goal of services offered to this segment of the University student body, then the voice of experience in relation to those services may provide insight into their effectiveness. Therefore, allowing the voices of those experiences to be heard was priority. This placed my methodological choices within the qualitative category. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) provide a generic definition of qualitative research that helped inform my methodology.

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, … at this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to

make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 4-5).

Attempting to make visible the experiences of Aboriginal students captures how I approached this project. I felt situated to see these experiences (my own and student peers) from the emic position. I also felt a potential disconnect between these experiences and how the University viewed these experiences. This led me to attempt to represent (make visible) these experiences. Interviewing presented the best potential method for my representation of the voice of these experiences. To provide a frame of reference of individual experience in relation to the quantitative data of previous chapters, interviewing current Aboriginal students appeared to be the best method of revealing some of the meaning of their experiences.

Phenomenological Framework

Accessing stories regarding Aboriginal students lived experiences appeared to me as being within a phenomenological paradigm. Phenomenological data is the descriptive data from collaborators of their views and responses to specific experiences. If Husserl (1970a) describes, phenomenology as "a discipline to describe how the world is constituted and experienced through conscious acts" (as cited in Van Manen, 1990, p. 184), then it can be applied to the conscious acts of Aboriginal students in their attendance at University and resultant experiences.

Van Manen's description of phenomenological research as being in search of "descriptions of the experiential meanings we live as we live them" (p. 11) was helpful in

formulation of a methodological approach. However, he also suggests the researcher adopt a "presuppositionless" (p. 29) stance. If Van Manen is suggesting a level of objectivity, then my attempts to understand my bias as outlined in the preface of this report help in this endeavor. Prejudice and bias cannot be fully removed from the qualitative research process, but detailed investigation of my position entering into the research has provided the ability to identify and understand my prejudices (Kenny, 2004). Gadamer (2000) said the position of "standing at a distance from the examined object simply does not exist" (p. 28). My experiences in relation to the research topic are relevant and influential, and I cannot fully distance myself from them, nor would I want to. I view myself as Gadamer describes "the measuring subject," as "standing in the stream of tradition, being conditioned, and knowing the other and his views, as such, on the basis of one's own conditionality" (ibid).

My goal of exploring the problem of low Aboriginal participation in the University environment is relevant to the Aboriginal student community in which I include myself. Selection of a methodological position that was responsive to that particular context was important. The diversity of individual backgrounds and experiences of the participants and their shared concern of the research topic (Aboriginal University participation) lead me to consider their participation as collaboration. As my reference to participants as being collaborators implies, my experiences in relation to the research topic are relevant and influential.

Phenomenology as defined by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) captures my concern of personal bias and assumptions. "Phenomenology is the study of the world as it appears to individuals when they place themselves in a state of consciousness that reflects an effort to be free of everyday biases and beliefs" (p. 600). Comparing Gall, Borg, & Gall's definition of phenomenology to Gadamer's description of a "measuring subject" (an emic qualitative researcher) reveals synchronicity. When I position myself as an Aboriginal researcher investigating Aboriginal students, I am:

> a person who finds himself already within the context of his society, his epoch, his nexus of prejudices, his experience of the world. All this is already in effect and is determinative whenever we confront a particular perspective or interpret a doctrine (Gadamer, 2000, p. 28).

It is an aspect of that world which pertains to Aboriginal University students as it appears to them (and me), that became the topic of this study. This satisfies the first stage of planning a phenomenological investigation as identified by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996). I had identified "a topic of personal and social significance" (p. 601). This approach of applying a phenomenological methodology to study Aboriginal student experiences is modeled after the research in the area of First Nations high school students and achievement (Steinhauer, 1999). I mention this again to further explain the connection between her research and mine. She identifies herself as a teacher and a member of a First Nations community, which places her research as a topic of personal significance. My personal significance is also due to my placement as a member of a First Nation and a University student. Aboriginal students' experiences in school, whether high school or

University, is socially significant as demonstrated by the concern regarding low Aboriginal graduation rates overall.

Method and Process

The next stage of planning a phenomenological investigation is in regard to participant selection. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) recommend appropriate participants as those "who have experienced the phenomenon being studied and share the researcher's interest in understanding its nature and meaning" (p. 601). Aboriginal student participants were located through personal contacts and referrals at the University of Alberta. In the process of negotiating participation and upon completion of the project, certain protocols were observed in the spirit of respect and reciprocity. As mentioned earlier in the Preface of this report, I viewed the participants as giving me a gift of their collaborations. This placed the concept of respect as foremost in our relationship. Full explanations of my intentions began each of our relationships in this research. In the spirit of reciprocity, each of the participants was offered a gift in the form of a hard cover notebook/journal. This offering was made not as payment for service, but rather as recognition of the gift (time and stories) they were giving me, the researcher.

Probing for the Aboriginal students' experiences at the University required a method of giving voice to their versions and accounts of the situations (context) and results of those experiences. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) suggest selection of a method or combination of methods "in order to obtain a comprehensive description of their experiences of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 602). Interviewing is the most appropriate method in

satisfying all these requirements. In accessing versions of experience through the interview format, the collaborator's "thoughts, … perceptions, feelings and perspectives" (Wellington, 2000, p.71), could be probed. The semi-structured interview style (p. 75) was utilized to provide the collaborators with an opportunity to reflect and share their experiences. Although all participants are Aboriginal students, there is considerable diversity among their places of origin, family background and pre-University experiences. I was concerned about attributing qualities to individuals from my assumptions. Recognizing their diversity, I felt a collaborative approach was necessary.

On a different level, Walter Lightning suggests that the collaboration itself, satisfying the need to think with someone else, is an example of "the indigenous mind in action" reflecting that in thinking this way, collaboratively, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (1992, p.225). The experience of listening to the stories of the participants' experiences at the University became a personal educational experience for me. Readers of this thesis who are established in "an indigenous intellectual tradition" may recognize this as an opportunity to both inform and teach me in the indigenous "core educational model" of sharing stories (Cruikshank, 1990, p. 340).

Validation through Reciprocity

In-depth interviewing as described by Marshall and Rossman (1999) captured my reflexive concerns well and frames them as a fundamental assumption of qualitative research: "The participants perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (p. 108). Van Manen's description

of hermeneutic phenomenology provides a clearer understanding of the potential of researcher bias to misinterpret the participant view of the phenomenon of interest. He presents an apparent contradiction of combining a phenomenological methodology and its descriptive nature to let things speak for themselves, with the application of an interpretative (hermeneutic) methodology. In describing their experiences, the students have made a meaningful interpretation already. The telling of the story is already an interpretive process (1990, p. 180-181). My concern was that I must make a further interpretation that will occur in relation to my own experiences and assumptions. Van Manen has presented logical support that although the researcher cannot fully eliminate interpretive bias, neither can the participant eliminate the interpretive process in the telling of the experience.

Gadamer assisted in understanding my concerns. To him, the hermeneutic process is "to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (1975, p. 263). In this sense, my interpretations of the students' experiences require an understanding of the contextual placement in which they (and myself) are situated.

Interpretive clarity can be achieved through a validation process; in this case, the rechecking with participants as to whether the portrayal of their stories is how they intended for the story to be heard. Consultation for clarification of meaning and validation of my interpretation occurred with each participant. I interpret this application of a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology as satisfying validation and reliability

research concerns, as long as awareness of the potential bias of the researcher is explicit, and effort is made to clarify meaning with the participant.

Outside Insider Perspective

Entering into the research I identified myself as potentially having both the etic and emic perspective. As described in the Preface, I viewed this as an advantage in accessing previously untapped qualitative data. Upon further reflection and collaboration with my supervisor, I investigated the issues surrounding the "outside insider" perspective. This position requires careful attention by the outside insider investigator who "may mistakenly assume common cultural understandings with interviewees and fail to explore their respondents' unique perceptions" (LaSala, 2003, p. 15). This issue will be expanded upon in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Participants (collaborators)

As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, all of the participants are enrolled in a program of study at the University of Alberta. All participants self-identified as being Aboriginal, and some were very descriptive of his or her place and family origin. Not all were recognized as having Indian status as defined by the Indian Act (1985). All are from western Canada, with one individual from northwest Canada. Of the original five students who agreed to participate, only four gave consent for their input to be utilized in this report after the interview process was complete. The individual who withdrew consent cited anonymity concerns. There is a cross section of gender representation that is near

the actual Aboriginal gender distribution on campus: three female and one male. Age and parental status was not targeted or prescreened. The fact of the age group of participants was from 25-45 years is significant. The fact that all the females are parents was discovered within the research process and is a significant finding.

Data Collection

Prior to contact with any potential participants, application and approval was granted under the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants (GFC Policy Manual, Section 66), commonly referred to as the ethics review process. The standards and procedures have been observed and complied with throughout the project, including informing participants of their right to withdraw at any time.

Prior to the interviews a discussion took place with each of the participants to outline the scope of the research and request their participation. These introductory meetings took on an atmosphere of recruitment. As mentioned earlier, that potential participant selection came relatively easily due to my position as an Aboriginal student at the University for a number of years. Word of mouth through staff and student peers was effective. However, each of the potential candidates was reserved and cautious in making the commitment to participate. Some opted out without participating and one opted out after participating. The two reasons most cited for non-participation are: anonymity concerns and inability to make the time commitment.

All but one interview were audio taped. Only portions of those recordings that are relevant to this research have been transcribed. As many of the participants are personal acquaintances, some of the content of recordings became outside the scope of this research, and in one case, portions were requested to be erased.

There was a particular aspect of ethnographic, or participant observation employed that revealed a potentially guarded naturalistic response to the interviews. It will be discussed further in my conclusions.

The Interviews

All of the interviews took place on the University of Alberta campus. Various locations were utilized, depending upon the preference of the participant. These included a private office, a semi-private office and a semi-private windowed study room in a library.

The duration of the interviews varied between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. The semi-structured approach evolved to an open-ended nature in some cases. The freedom of direction by the participant was adopted in cases when it seemed appropriate. Reference to an interview guide was made early in each session with the caveat that stories were encouraged over terse literal responses.

The prepared interview guide consisted of questions that were intended to provide direction when required, and structure when off track. It satisfied both these purposes at different times. These questions are:

- *Have you any experience with Aboriginal organizations at the University of Alberta such as Aboriginal Student Services, Aboriginal Student Council, Faculty of Native Studies, etc?*

- *Did you have any experience with these organizations prior to your enrollment? Was that a factor in deciding to apply to the U of A?*

- *Why did you apply to university? Why the U of A?*

- *Can you name any goals that you may hope to achieve at U of A?*

- *Do any of the University Aboriginal organizations play a role in helping you achieve these goals?*

- *I have used the word "achieve." In order to help identify and understand factors that have an impact upon Aboriginal student "achievement," I think I should ask for a definition of achievement in this context. What does achievement mean to you?*

- *Have your university experiences matched your expectations from prior to enrollment? Why or why not?*

- *Are you aware of the University of Alberta's Aboriginal student policies?*

- *Would you care to share any positive experiences during your time at the University?*

- *Would you care to share any negative experiences during your time at the University?*

- *Given our earlier discussion regarding achievement, can you think of any ways to improve achievement?*

In the majority of cases, once formalities and initial tension were overcome, the shared interest in understanding the meaning of our experiences at University took us into realms of sharing life stories in order to contextualize our arrival at University and revisit the goals and expectations derived from that experience. These stories provide context and meaning to our goals and aspirations.

Data Handling

During each interview, permission was granted for me to take notes of a significant response or dialogue. In the one case where it was requested that audiotape not be used, a more detailed set of notes was taken at the encouragement of the participant. Following each interview, some field notes were recorded generally to capture my impressions and opinions. The notes of the previous interview were helpful in preparation for the next interview. Themes were identified and highlighted. During the transcription process, care was taken to identify significant statements of observation that were missed in the notes. The audiotapes, the partial transcriptions and interview notes were handled and stored in accordance with the approved ethics review.

Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (1999) articulate three directives of contemporary qualitative research that capture my concerns well.

a) We, as researchers, must examine closely how we represent the participants in our work.

b) We should carefully scrutinize the "complex interplay of our own personal biography, power and status, interactions with participants and written word" (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 67).

c) We must be vigilant about the dynamics of ethics and politics in our work (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 5).

The intent of the preface of this research presentation was to present my background and biases entering into the project. It became an important part of the reflection undertaken

throughout the project. Also mentioned was the reflexivity, the awareness that my own assumptions held the potential to steer or lead the interviews. These concerns and inclusions represent my careful scrutiny of the interplay between my personal experiences and those of the participants. Directives a) & c) will be further discussed in the following section of the research limitations.

Limitations of the Research

The Aboriginal community at the University is relatively small, therefore there are two points of concern: small sample size and ensuring anonymity. The small sample size can be interpreted as a reality of the state of Aboriginal presence at the University. In addition to this observation, the original research proposal was to interview six participants. For reasons explained in the next chapter, the actual number of participants is four. However, the small sample size does not invalidate the content of the project. The experiences of one individual can potentially illuminate the effectiveness of a service provider; four Aboriginal students talking about programs and services offered to them can provide even more value to those service providers and to other Aboriginal students. It should also be stated that this project is intended to assist in understanding Aboriginal student experiences. The suggestions for change in the conclusion of this report are included to better understand the experiences of those whom the services are designed to assist. They hold the potential to inform and influence policy revision.

Another concern directly related to the relatively small community of Aboriginal people at the University is personal anonymity. The development of personal relationships

between Aboriginal students is common. In some cases these personal relationships are maintained only during the school year. Most participants expressed concern regarding anonymity and confidentiality was requested regarding some of the more personal data gathered. Effort has been made to mask the identities of all participants in this research in order to avoid any process of elimination assumptions that could jeopardize identifying those who wish to remain anonymous. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

In response to Marshall and Rossman's (1999) directives a) & c) listed earlier, the examination of how I represent the participants and my vigilance in considering the dynamics of ethics and politics, also calls for anonymity of all participants. The University's procedural ethical requirements were fully respected and followed. Further consideration of the small community of Aboriginal students on campus called for close examination of my representations. As will be described more fully in the introduction of the next chapter, a conflict developed between my desire to provide a "thick description" of the data towards revealing and making visible those lived experiences of Aboriginal students, and my sense of ethical duty to the participants and their communities.

The next chapter further expands on the dynamics of ethics and politics at play due to the embedded nature and social situations of Aboriginal students at the University. This precedes the voices of the students as they themselves describe their experiences.

Chap 4. The Interviews and Analysis

This chapter presents the data that emerged in my efforts to understand the experiences of Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta. The conversations and interviews that I conducted focused on the lived experiences leading to, and during the participants' time enrolled at the University. These experiences were solicited in relation to programs and services offered at the University specifically for Aboriginal students. As the scheduled interviews progressed, the diversity within Aboriginal shared experiences became very evident. Later as I began to analyze the data, distinct themes emerged.

As previously stated, the number of participants resulted in four from an original estimation of six. In one case due to complete inconsistencies in personal schedules, repeated attempts to conduct a formal interview became impossible. This individual is still interested in the focus of this research and may conduct similar research in the future. The other missing input is from an individual who participated, but upon follow up, exercised their option to withdraw from the project.

Thick and Thin descriptions

According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), in research such as this, the data is commonly presented through attempts to provide a "thick description." The appropriateness of such a presentation is perhaps accepted in qualitative academia due to the ability of the voice of the participants to be as closely articulated as possible in this format. Nonetheless, still foremost in my mind is the holistic portrayal of the Aboriginal peoples' experiences with

postsecondary education. Due to the nature of this research project, the individuals who volunteered to participate are self-identifying Aboriginal people, if only through the simple act of accessing services offered for Aboriginal students. My commitment to the individual participants and the Aboriginal communities in which I am involved (one being a larger Aboriginal student peer group) required identifying a potential conflict, as outlined in the preface of this report.

The individual experiences of students are one aspect of research of this type. The experiences of students as Aboriginal peoples are another aspect of this research that is a shared experience. These experiences are shared by myself and by Aboriginal communities. In this sense, the symbolic and meaningful nature of culture as described by the theoretical anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has been addressed already in this thesis. The historical background provided in chapter 2 can be positioned as a "thick description" of the cultural context and complex realities of the social life of Aboriginal postsecondary students today. The following collection of experiences can therefore be thought of as manifestations of those cultural contexts that can be thickly described (p. 14). The "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" (p. 7) in terms of Aboriginal culture and socio/political realities, I feel has been demonstrated in the previous contextual outline of the historical Aboriginal education experience in Canada. The educational experiences of the participants to follow are their meaningful interpretations of the intertwined nature of that socio/historical context and are the contemporary Aboriginal student contexts.

The concern of confidentiality and anonymity expressed by the majority of participants led me to question whether provision of a thick description of their testimony was appropriate. I sensed a conflict between protecting the identity of the participants and allowing the reader to hear their voice. I did not wish to describe the participants so well as to undermine their anonymity.

In the essay, *The Need For Thin Description* (Brekhus et al, 2005), the authors argue that in the natural process of analysis and representing research there exists the inevitable choice making process. If fact, considerations regarding the type of data should be sought, what data is to be included and the level of detail of included date, falls within the "preinvestigative *empirical purviews*, developing *analytic aims*, and *available data*" (p. 863. emphasis in original). Within my original planning for this research project, due ethical consideration for participant anonymity was planned and outlined in the approved ethics proposal. The anonymity concerns appeared predictable and were within my "preinvestigative empirical purview." My range of concern was the embedded nature of an Aboriginal student community within a larger social entity. In that inevitable choice making process, anonymity was a higher priority than a detailed accurate description of the individual's background.

I was very conscious of the relatively small and close-knit nature of the Aboriginal student community at the University. We are a minority and drawing accurate conclusions regarding identity from research such as this, is an inherent concern. To overcome this, the context of the participants experiences (and mine) became the focus,

rather than the detailed richness of their individual narratives. Similar justifications for application of specific "thin descriptions" occurs in patient confidentiality in the bioethics of medical research (Davis, 1991), and public privacy concerns in research of social deviant behaviour (cited in Brekhus et al, 2005). The shared postsecondary experience is where methodological application of striving for a thick description of the emergent *themes* will apply. In this aspect of data presentation, I again follow the model of data presentation utilized by Steinhauer in her Masters thesis; *Sohkastwawak; They Are Resilient (First Nations Students and Achievement)* (1999). That model is vignettes of the participants with analytic focus upon themes. Steinhauer articulated her concerns:

> To me the issue of relational accountability supersedes any academic requirements since I choose to continue to be a member of my community. Still I was faced with the fact that I had to present the data in a format worthy of 'western academic standards,' standards not necessarily my own but standards which I have agreed to. Therefore, I have reconciled my feelings by providing the themes in a manner that does not compromise anonymity yet attempts to present the findings in the context in which they were intended (p. 40).

Provision of vignettes of the participants will assist to contextualize the data. All participants are current students at the University of Alberta. All participants volunteered in response to my request for Aboriginal student perspectives. In this respect we can consider the participants as self-identifying Aboriginal people. In cultural fashion, the participants each provided detailed family and community information in our personal introductions. Identifying information has been noticeably omitted from the following vignettes. The vignettes will include brief descriptions (paraphrased from the interviews) of how each individual arrived to University studies. As stated in the previous chapter, pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

The Participants

Samantha

Samantha is a graduate student. As an outstanding high school student she was "streamed" by family and high school staff (a Native student advisor) for University entrance. Samantha was aware of herself being the only Aboriginal student in the advanced class. She visited the University campus when she was in grade 11 as part of the school district's Outstanding Aboriginal Students program. Samantha also attributes having an Aunty attending the University of Alberta as a factor in her applying here. Her first year was difficult. The suicide of a lifetime friend, the passing of her Grandfather and her pregnancy all contributed to Samantha's decision to drop out of University at that time. Three years later, she returned. With her Aunty now finished at University, Samantha attributes the Aboriginal student advisor at the School of Native Studies as playing an influential role in her success upon her return. Her transition to graduate studies upon completion of the Bachelors degree was influenced by brief conversations with Aboriginal scholars. Today Samantha is a single mother managing parenting, maintaining the household and University graduate studies through physical adversity. Recently Samantha suffered a traumatic health event. Through her recovery, access to University services has been important to her. She attributes her motivation to continue University studies through the adversity due to a deep sense of social responsibility to Aboriginal communities overall. Through recovering health, she is committed to completing her program.

Denise

Denise is also a graduate student and a single mother. Also earning her Bachelors degree later in life, Denise carries an air of friendly confidence and is quick to laugh. She marks the beginning of her post secondary journey when she was able to connect her interest in the Cree language to school by helping in a language course at a community college. Her original intent upon applying to a University was business/commerce, but the Cree language offerings were a factor in choosing this University. Denise had progressed through the Transition Year Program, to the Faculty of Arts before transferring to the Faculty of Native Studies. Receiving counsel from various sources throughout this journey, (including being diagnosed with a learning disability), Denise has been able to mold her interests in language and creative writing into employment qualifications for work in her home community. In addition to family and community pride, she is very satisfied with her growth and creative opportunity stemming from her journey through formal studies. Denise attributes her ability to express herself creatively to the support she received and adversity overcome at the University.

David

David is currently an undergraduate student. The road to the University has not been a direct one for David. After quitting high school, the realization of limited employment opportunity prompted David to return a few years later and complete grade 12. It was during this final stage of high school that he visited the University of Alberta as part of the high school's advanced education counseling program, however he did not see himself as attending University at this time. Aboriginal culture is very important to

David. While attending various culture based courses and workshops, offered through urban Aboriginal organizations, he was introduced to readings of a historical and political nature by Aboriginal authors. "I knew about colonization from a lived experience, but not the terminology." The path to follow his interest in reading more about the history of Aboriginal people led through the University College Entrance Program (UCEP) offered at Yellowhead Tribal College to the University of Alberta. David attributes his choice to study at the School of Native Studies as twofold: his renewed sense of spirituality grounded in Aboriginal cosmologies and his passion for Aboriginal political matters. To be comfortable in further exploring these realms, he needed to be around likeminded people where freethinking was possible. Deeply passionate about the future of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, David's confident presence and his ability to articulate his thoughts, left me with the impression that he will be (if not already) a person of influence and holds leadership potential.

Maria

Maria is currently an undergraduate student. She identifies herself as the first in her family not "born in the bush or on the trap line." When describing her family Maria referred to them as "educationally successful." This contributed to her participation in post secondary education being anticipated from a young age. Directly from high school to a degree granting college (away from her community) was a good transition. Two years into a BSc program Maria chose to put her studies on hold while she returned home to have a baby. With family support Maria was able to respond to advice from a professional in her community, to return to school, but change her focus from science to

commerce. Returning to the same university college as previously attended, Maria discovered the University of Alberta ASSC handbook and subsequently the University Internet Website, while in an administration office at the college. This is Maria's first year in attendance at the University of Alberta and she enjoys the people and environment. As a mother away from her family and community, she is very focused upon why she is at University, which includes playing an active role on campus in Aboriginal organizations. She expresses herself very well and appears friendly and confident.

Experiences of Aboriginal Student Services

Having established context and background to the content of the research, the following section presents the main focus of the interviews: the personal experiences in relation to the University services offered. These services are the outcome of the Senate decision to implement Aboriginal Student Policy aiming to *recruit, retain and graduate* Aboriginal peoples. Therefore these goals provide the category headings under which the main themes from the interviews are described.

These four individuals cannot experience all Aboriginal programs and services, especially where the sample size is small. Therefore some are not experienced at all (for example, although aware of programs such as the Aboriginal Law Program, all the participants had no direct experience to it.) For this reason, the list of relational services being talked about is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather, descriptive of only those which were revealed through the research.

Recruitment

The fact that all participants are current students at the University may be seen as direct evidence of successful recruitment. My own observation, which is supported in the previous vignettes, is that general University recruitment efforts have had the greatest impact on the participants. Visits to high schools by University personnel, high school student visits to the University campus, and accessing University literature from counseling offices at other post secondary campuses are evidence of this.

When the participants were asked directly if they felt as though they were recruited as an Aboriginal student, the majority response was no; 3 participants did not feel as though they were recruited specifically because they were Aboriginal. The participant who felt she was recruited as an Aboriginal student attributes her selection for recruitment to the fact that she was an honours student in high school. Samantha was in grade eleven when she was selected to participate in the schools district's Outstanding Aboriginal Student program in Edmonton.

> They brought me to campus and I visited the Aboriginal Student Council, Native Student Services and the School of Native Studies on our tour of campus. And then we had a big lunch with all the other students there, and they brought people in from each of those departments to come and talk to us as well.

Samantha continued to describe the nature of support at the high school.

> I had a lot of support in high school. The Native Student Advisor in my high school was very supportive. He would often pull me out of class just to let me talk. I was the only Native student in my school that was in the advanced classes, in the honours class.

The other participants did not describe any such high school recruitment efforts or support but had University of Alberta information made available to them once they were involved in post secondary programs other than the University.

David describes his visit to the U of A campus during high school as not being influential in his later decision to attend university. It was in his UCEP program that he was encouraged to consider application to the School of Native Studies at the University of Alberta and it was at this point that he gave serious thought to applying for admission to the University of Alberta.

In Denise's case, the language instructor Denise worked with at college was a University of Alberta Alumni and it was her suggestion that Denise investigate the Cree language courses at the University.

For Maria, although she was considering the University of Alberta due to the international reputation of the Faculty of Commerce, she actually accessed the University of Alberta Aboriginal services literature through a brochure in an administration office of her college.

Two participants attributed having friends or family attending the University as being influential during the time of selecting a University. In both cases, our participants asked their contacts on campus about the receptiveness of the University environment to Aboriginal students. David was concerned to know whether or not he could continue to

actively pursue and study his interests in Aboriginal policy and resistance to colonization. His friend (a student in Native Studies) reassured him that "freethinking was encouraged," but that he may find himself "on your own" in some classes.

One participant who had no personal contacts on campus cited his/her first phone call to Native Student Services (currently ASSC) as having been an important factor leading to choosing the University of Alberta.

Location was unanimously cited as a factor in selecting the University of Alberta, but not the most important factor. Two participants grew up in Edmonton, and all participants were very familiar with the city.

An important factor in University preparation is family support. Two participants said their families prepared them for postsecondary education from a very early age. Three participants said there families were supportive during their time at University.

Only one of the participants mentioned financial concerns as a factor in their application to University. This participant chose to start University studies at a degree granting college because of reduced costs for two years before transferring to the U of A at full cost.

Retain and Graduate

The interview questions asked the participants to reflect upon both positive and negative experiences during their time at the University. Summaries of their responses have been organized below in relation to their experiences of University of Alberta services for Aboriginal students. I conclude with a commentary on two important themes, which emerged from the data: racism, and achievement.

Aboriginal Student Services Centre (ASSC)

Formerly known as Native Student Services, all participants had experienced the services offered through this office at some time during their time at University.

Two weeks into her first term, Maria was directed to this office when she needed a fax service. While there, she learned about the services the centre offered (including the website) and she discovered the existence of the Aboriginal Student Council. When visiting the ASSC website;

> I found out they had this whole Aboriginal Orientation Program, and you know, that would have been great for me. If I could have been aware prior to going to school, I could have registered for it. The Aboriginal Student Orientation would have been more beneficial than spending the day will 18 year olds going; rah, rah, rah, that we did at the general orientation. Maybe communication between the Registrars Office and ASSC, you know, you've been accepted and those that self-identified, maybe just a postcard from ASSC in the normal registration package.

One participant found talking to people in this office very helpful in overcoming the intimidation of being a mature student, the seemingly large student body and campus navigation assistance.

> I was very surprised and excited about being accepted (*admission into University*.) I had been out of school for some time, this was such a large institution, I felt intimidated by the population, plus how young everybody was compared to me. I had anxiety problems. I was very affected by large crowds.

This participant also utilized the tutoring services offered at the ASSC. When describing this, she mentioned that it helped her through a difficult course and that it was free. Having a good experience with tutoring, she later offered her services as a tutor.

Samantha's reflections on her experiences during her period of health crisis and recovery are informative and provide a unique perspective of ASSC services. During her recovery and return to University, Samantha accessed the Specialized Support for Disabled Students (SSDS) office at the University on her own initiative. They were very helpful and she attributes their services as a factor in her ability to return to school. However, in hindsight, Samantha now recognizes a deficiency. She required spiritual and emotional assistance through this time. A traditional healer or counselor may have been appropriate in attending to Samantha's healing in a holistic fashion. She feels that ASSC would likely have been able to refer her to such a person. But the counsel received from the SSDS office made no mention of ASSC, even though they acknowledged Samantha as an Aboriginal client.

> I can look back on it now, a year later, and talking to a healer would have been nice. There was never any talk of that, I didn't necessarily expect it from them, but now, a year later, it would have helped. I depended on my SSDS advisor to direct me. She did what she could within the limits of what she had at her disposal, but I feel there is more that could have been done. I feel that if there had been other supports, or some kind of relationship between them and ASSC… there was nothing considered as to what I need as an Aboriginal student with a disability. As a student, you just trust the person you are seeking help from is going to open up every avenue that is available, especially if you are not quite all there. My condition was hard enough in itself. To have to think about all these steps became overwhelming. My Faculty was helpful. SSDS was helpful. A referral (to ASSC) was required.

Later in the interview Samantha expanded this point;

> Other services are not geared to provide for Aboriginal students specifically. No recognition that they might be different, that they might need a different kind of support. Just in terms of who the Aboriginal population on campus is, they are older, they are parents, and thinking about cultural, spiritual and emotional needs of Aboriginal students, we are different. Aboriginal students should be able to go to any office on campus and get appropriate services, and ASSC can be that resource for these other services.

Aboriginal Student Council (ASC)

Three of the four participants cited the ASC as an important part of their University experience. The ASC lounge plays a large part of this. For Maria, it is important in having a place to go:

> to be with people I can identify with, with people I can tell stories, talk about things that are unique to Aboriginal culture. It almost has, like, a family atmosphere. It's like we are creating a mini-family on campus to support each other. It extends beyond just meeting

> for coffee. Like some of us have formed groups to work out together, informally started a walking group, it's like a big family.

David referred to the ASC lounge as a place of refuge from the felt racism on campus. He says the peer support he receives through the ASC is a retention factor.

Samantha echoes the importance of being around like-minded people. In having more experience on campus, she issues a cautionary note about ASC involvement.

> It was good in a sense that when you get around the table and you started talking and you get into that activist mode, you talked about stuff that matters, that maybe you were not covering in your classes. You talked about the Aboriginal community, Aboriginal issues,… and that was positive in a way. It was a supplement to what I was learning. We are here to get an education for a purpose, to advance the social conditions of Aboriginal people. That's the purpose of most Aboriginal students on campus. Taking it out of the classroom setting and saying: What are we going to do? The problem was that we ended up just talking about it, then playing cards. In my last two years (of undergrad) I had to separate from there because I was skipping classes to be there.

Transition Year Program (TYP)

The TYP is administered through the Aboriginal Student Services Centre. Two of the participants began their University career through this program. David is thankful for the help he received in the TYP program and recognized that "being with other native people" was important to his achievement in that program. However, TYP staff had informed him:

> that only 10% of TYP students made it into mainstream programs. They know it! Because they know it, the entire program can be seen as a weeding out process. You asked me about retaining Aboriginal students? Because they know there is such a low success rate in the TYP program, it has to be viewed that they are failing to retain them.

The other participant who has entered the University through the TYP program ranked this program as the most helpful in her University experience.

Faculty of Native Studies

Three of the four participants studied at this Faculty, one currently, and two have earned Bachelor of Arts in Native Studies degrees. Naturally for these three, the staff and course work played a large part in their University experience. The Native Studies student advisor was mentioned by two of the participants as being very helpful and supportive.

During her early studies in Native Studies, Samantha was seriously considering applying to Law school. She still remembers the advice she received from Harold Cardinal when she was considering Law school. His advice to her: "You don't have to go to Law school to study the Law." She also remembers the response she received after telling one of the Native Studies professors she was considering Law school; "Oh, great. We are losing another of our minds to Law school." These two academic opinions where influential in her decision to continue her Native Studies program and then focus upon attaining a PhD.

David's concerns about whether he could pursue studies in Aboriginal policy and resistance to colonization within the Univ sity were mentioned earlier. David states he is

satisfied with the Native Studies course work in their ability to help his understanding to grow and to gain knowledge to better his people.

When asked about negative experiences on campus, Denise shared two stories in relation to the Faculty of Native Studies. While attending a core course, she was told to "Shhh!" by an instructor. "I walked out of that course, because I was basically told to shut-up. I missed the drop date by two days, so I failed and had to retake it. But with a different instructor." The other experience she shared was her disappointment in the Faculty after she had won a major award for her creative expression. "They never acknowledged my achievement." This negative experience turned positive when, in response, a Faculty member arranged a public display of Denise's work. This was an important event for Denise. "I saw how my work can affect people." Denise still draws upon this moment for inspiration.

Samantha provided her personal insight into Native Studies courses. Recall that Samantha was an outstanding Aboriginal student in high school and is currently a graduate student.

> I always felt that in my Native Studies courses, so much more was expected from us, more than any other class I had taken across campus. You always had to do a little better. In looking back on it, you had to do graduate type work in Native Studies, whereas in Poli-Sci, it wasn't as hard. That may be just my perception, but I feel that to get a degree in Native Studies was a little more difficult than anywhere else. I thought that was kind of funny because when I was there and when I was graduating, it was looked upon as a lesser degree. I always thought that was kind of funny, people thought it was easy in Native Studies.

Indigenous Peoples Education (IPE) graduate specialization

The two graduate student participants have experience in IPE courses. In each of these cases the students have been able to link course content to their other endeavors in their lives, whether employment or research for other courses or projects.

> What I learned in (the IPE course) prepared me to be very satisfied about my role on a research team. I'm very happy I went into the project (research with human subjects), because I really think I brought something to it. We have a great team, but I hammer over and over again how we should be treating the families. Because what's important to me, in doing that type of research is, maybe not the outcome, the outcome is important, but what matters to me is how we do it. How we treat the families, making this as positive an experience as possible and treating them with respect. And respecting the… what they are giving us. Recognizing that they are actually giving something to us and we need to be responsible and respectful with it. I was applying information from the IPE class and that's an achievement. That's how I contribute. Sometimes they get sick of me.

The other participant talked about the IPE course work as one of her positive experiences at the University and gave reasons why.

> The combination of support from (IPE) faculty and other students, for my individual thoughts and work, you know… recognition that my writing, my work is… valid…, real… my work was understood by others. The people were wonderful. Meeting and talking in class about ideas that are important to native people about the way we think, about the way we do things… It was nice to hear other the people's ideas and thoughts, right here at the University, about the stuff we usually talk about away from here, away from the dominant culture.

Shared Thematic Experiences

In the overview data analysis, insight into some shared experiences of Aboriginal students emerged. As I analyzed the data, other than the individual experiences in relation to recruitment and retention provided so far, it became evident that emerging themes did provide a view into shared experiences. These common themes will follow under the headings of racism and achievement.

Racism

Each of the participants cited racism as a negative factor that Aboriginal students are faced with at the University. This factor surfaced so often, that I will dedicate this section to participant responses regarding this issue.

Although Samantha was very successful in high school, she stated that racism was prevalent. It caused her to change high schools even though she was academically successful.

> There was this really negative undercurrent of racism. There weren't a lot of Aboriginal students there, and those that were, would try to hide it in some way. It was a time in my life when I was starting to realize what being an Aboriginal person meant, and starting to become more involved culturally, ... so I decided I wanted to be among my own people, so I changed high schools to ... because they had a high proportion of Aboriginal kids there. My grades really slid in grade 12,... I barely made it into U of A, but I made some lifetime friendships there.

In a University class discussion about care for the elderly, Samantha was describing her Cree family experiences.

> Some of the (non-Aboriginal) students took offense and accused me of judging them for sending old people away to live in homes. That is not what I was saying. I was trying to encourage them to see it from another cultural perspective.

Samantha makes another observation regarding research ethics.

> We have to follow their (University) standards, their ethical standards, their methods. It would be very difficult to use some teachings from elders as reference. If you do, you have to follow a different set of ethics and protocols. In research with elders you have to follow the cultural protocol of that place. That may be a problem with the University in seeing the difference between payment and an offering.

Denise was very aware of "being the only brown face" in her English classes. "In this sea of white kids, there was this old brown cow." She was enrolled in the Faculty of Arts to pursue her passion and skills for creative writing, but she was "not interested in the English core courses. They were not me. I was interested in Cree language." This is why she transferred to Native Studies. She mentioned there were no specific incidents of racism in her Arts/English studies; however she was continuously aware that she was the only Aboriginal person in these courses. Once in Native Studies, with more Aboriginal students, her concern shifted to the expectations of the instructors. It was here in Native Studies that she felt discrimination from a few of the staff. Not racial discrimination, but academic.

> If the thoughts or ideas being presented are challenged, the student is viewed as disgruntled. I felt ignored… that they focused on the smart people. I didn't feel this way in Arts when all the people were white. It was a condescending attitude from a few Native Studies instructors. I felt some kind of invisible barrier between some instructors and students. I just avoided them.

David cites being with other native people in the TYP program as a significant factor in his achievement of admission into a main stream faculty. But once in the mainstream classes, he began to hear "racist comments from people in class." Upon further reflecting, he attributed the racist comments as having origins in ignorance of Aboriginal people and culture, and bias and bigotry. "I feel that I have to fight for my right to even be here" he said about attending mainstream courses. When I asked if he could think of any specific examples or an incident, he responded "that generally, people hide their views of native people. It is more noticeable here at the U of A because the students are trying to be more intellectual."

In addition to being the object of felt racism, he feels that just being here is difficult. "The deadlines, the grades, are all part of the University culture." At times David feels as though "I am just surviving here (at University.)" He asks the question: "Why should I have to sacrifice my culture to improve academic achievement?"

Maria states that she has never felt racism at the University. However, all of her Aboriginal friends have. When Maria is included in conversations with other Aboriginal students and they are talking about racism, and sharing their experiences of racist incidents at University, Maria found it hard to believe originally. "I didn't know whether to believe it or not. I was like, did that really happen or are you pulling my leg?" Later in the interview, I asked Maria if she had any suggestions for improvements to the services offered to Aboriginal students. Apparently convinced that her friends are telling the truth,

her first response was to address the felt racism of her peers. "It should be highlighted and dealt with."

While stating that she has not felt racism at the University, Maria has experienced the questions from other non-Aboriginal students in regard to Aboriginal culture and issues. "They expect me to have all the answers. I end up explaining the diversity among Aboriginal cultures." She then linked this idea with her statement to addressing the felt racism of her peers when she identifies "the need to educate non-Aboriginal people about Aboriginal people and cultures in Canada."

Achievement

Two of the goals of this research were to identify the participants' attitudes and conceptualizations of achievement, and attempt to articulate their desires and motivations towards the achievement of their goals. The following are responses to such questions as: What does achievement mean to them? What goals do they hope to achieve at the University? How did they view their experiences at the University? Have the services offered at the University of Alberta helped them move towards achievement of these goals?

All of the female participants took a hiatus from post-secondary studies to have children. Two of the three female participants were single mothers. When asked about achievement, each responded that family was their highest achievement and priority.

When asked about achievement at University, all the participants made some statement or two about helping Aboriginal people and/or communities.

- To contribute in some real way to change in the communities. That is achievement!
- As my understanding grows, it is knowledge for… to better my people. Achievement is knowing who you are content and happy in teaching colonization, in addressing the denial of Native peoples in Canada. Knowledge is good, but what is done with it? We have to walk the talk… for the children.
- Achievement is increasing the profile of education in the communities, if they desire it. In my community there is a recent emphasis on education, but still finding that balance between educational forms and cultural forms. We at the University are the educational form role models.
- To help others learn about Cree language.
- For the majority of Aboriginal students, the purpose (of education) is to advance the social conditions for all Aboriginal people as a whole.

Two of the four admitted to not having this final goal as they entered University. These two entered with goals of increasing their earning potential. One said to me: "I wanted to make a lot of money. Is that shallow?" Following their return from having children, and as they experienced the Aboriginal community at the University (including staff/faculty, students and visiting speakers) their goals took a noticeable shift to advancing the cause of Aboriginal people in Canada in some way.

This is not to say the participants did not have personal academic goals. All four mentioned completing their degree as a goal. Samantha concisely stated: "My goal is a PhD." David made the clear distinction between his ideas about achievement for the

people/communities and his University goals. "There is a definition shift here. I have achieved a goal to go from TYP into my program. I have a new goal to get my degree." Along these lines, all participants related more personal goals.

For one participant, receiving recognition from student peers and faculty, for her academic ability is very important. "I have something to prove," she said. In responding to my earlier question about relating positive experiences at University, she responded:

> The happiest day I've had at the U of A was when, like, sixty people approached me at once to be in my (study) group. I thought to myself: I've proven myself. I was on a pink cloud. It felt good that they all wanted me.

Therefore, it was not surprising when this participant told me one of her goals was to be "recognized by other students for her intellectual prowess."

Another participant, having received an award for academic achievement, specifically stated the award "was not necessarily a goal. It's just receiving acknowledgment for my work." She further reflected on the question of: What goals does she hope to achieve at the University? by illustrating her difficulty in defining her academic goals: "Some achievement is personal and therefore hard to define. Accessing and providing support, fostering inquiry, even negative experiences can work towards goals, as stepping stones."

All participants viewed the University services for Aboriginal students as positive and three of the participants viewed them as essential. The ASSC has been accessed by all participants to varying degrees, and as such all participants viewed the services offered

by ASSC as beneficial, particularly for Aboriginal undergraduate students. Interestingly, one participant did not view the services available specifically to Aboriginal students as part of the University's Aboriginal Student Policy. In this participants view, the services are resultant from Aboriginal people exerting their presence in society and at the University. The result is not something being offered to Aboriginal students, but rather, a necessary response by the institution to the presence of Aboriginal people within. She made the point that this current research project is an example.

The diversity within Aboriginal shared experiences has appeared throughout this chapter. For example, the students have come to the University by different routes, some directly as a result of support and encouragement, and others on their own accord following their own interests. The fact that all participant's could relate to one or more of the services in place for Aboriginal students reveals the services are being utilized. The next chapter will more fully analyze the data and the themes previously identified.

Chap 5. Conclusion

Reflections and Recommendations

The gap between Aboriginal representation at the University and the Aboriginal population demographics demonstrates the under representation of Aboriginal peoples in post-secondary education relative to non-Aboriginal populations. Highlighting that the contemporary Aboriginal student is emerging from generations of Canadian Aboriginal educational efforts that were designed and implemented to civilize, Christianize and assimilate Aboriginal peoples into dominant societal, cultural and institutional norms, is an important aspect of this thesis. The maintenance and assertion of Aboriginal peoples distinction within Canadian society has resulted in institutional recognition of the barriers to post-secondary education that must be navigated by today's Aboriginal peoples. The programs and services offered at the University of Alberta to Aboriginal students/peoples are emergent from Aboriginal peoples demonstrating resiliency through that period. The purpose of this research was to investigate, from the perspective of current Aboriginal students, the extent to which the current University services that are specifically aimed at Aboriginal students have been influential in helping them towards and through University. The interview allowed me to access the experiences of current Aboriginal students at the University of Alberta in relation to these services.

This chapter provides the findings of that research and draws some implications from these findings. Situating myself as a beginner at conducting academic research, self-reflection and analysis became a large part of this project. For this reason, I present my

findings in relation to my initial assumptions. Implications, recommendations and future research considerations will be presented not under separate headings or sections, but in relation to each of my post-research responses to the initial assumptions.

Personal reflections

This personal note is intended to contextualize my thoughts as the interviews were conducted and entry into the analysis stage. In entering into the project and throughout my initial analysis stages, I carried an assumption that the participants were well versed in Aboriginal culture and those factors such as a unique set of values, beliefs and norms would emerge as a commonality. I expected that this presentation of data and analysis would portray the single finding of cultural difference between the Aboriginal student and the institution. The data did not support this. It took me some time and direction from my supervisor to come to the realization that I was trying to fit my assumptions into the research rather than allowing the data to speak for itself. Resolution came through focusing upon the experiences in relation to the services rather than the background of the individuals. With this cognitive shift, the portrayal of the experiences, including background information became easier. Once I stopped focusing upon them, common cultural themes did in fact emerge. Given this shift in my analytical approach, I feel some reflections upon my original assumptions are appropriate here. This method provides opportunity to clearly outline my thought processes as I analyzed the data. It may be seen as a somewhat unconventional method of data presentation, but this should not diminish the relevancy or the importance of the findings themselves.

Assumption 1

There are individuals currently attending the university who are well versed in indigenous knowledge and traditional methodologies (Kawagley, 1995).

While this assumption may still be accurate, the research did not investigate who, or how many, or even to what extent indigenous knowledge affects each of the participants experiences at University. In effect, the assumption became inconsequential as I continued to investigate experiences in relation to services. What was relevant to this research, however, can be described as the overlapping of cultures. Reframing my assumption in this fashion greatly helped in my analysis. A different question emerged. To what extent do Aboriginal students need to choose between conflicting cultural responses?

Parenting

One of the noticeable findings in response to this question was the priority placed upon family by all of the female participants. Every one of these participants left their post-secondary studies at some point to have children. Inherent in this statement is an important cultural norm. There was no remorse or guilt expressed from any of the participants regarding having left their studies incomplete. In fact, the participants that shared stories of this time in their life were clearly celebrating an achievement. It was very evident that family and children are more important than personal progress through a formal educational program. This may seem as an obvious point that is not culturally exclusive to Aboriginal people. The fact remains that all of the female Aboriginal participants are mature students with children. This fact was not solicited in participant

recruitment in any way. In fact, I did not even think of it until the data analysis stage of the research.

The ability of the mothers to return to continue their post-secondary studies was determined by the support networks available to the Aboriginal mother. Each of these participants had very good family and/or community support. Thus they were able to return to post-secondary studies.

Recommendation

Even though none of the participants mentioned a need for services such as child care services or access to family housing as part of their University experience, this may nonetheless point to an important issue in relation to the services offered to Aboriginal students at the University.

Further research is required to discover how many Aboriginal students leave their post-secondary programs of study, never to return, because they did not have the same level of personal family support as our participants. It may well be the case that University services designed to support Aboriginal parents could be successful in recruiting, retaining, and/or helping the return of Aboriginal students.

Culturally appropriate research and ethics

Another reflection on my assumption of indigenous knowledge holders at the University comes in the form of culturally responsive ethics. One of the graduate students observed

that she had two sets of research ethics with which to conform: one set University regulated and the other, culturally regulated. Clearly she felt an overlap of cultures. These were not necessarily seen as being in conflict, but presented ethical considerations and requirements additional to those prescribed by the University. Compliance was not an issue for this student. She naturally followed the procedures and protocols of both her self-perceived authorities. This prompted her concern for other qualitative research projects conducted where Aboriginal subjects were involved. Her specific concern is regarding the consideration and access to informed culturally responsive ethics. My own sense of this participant's ethical concern is the cognitive shift from the academic research for research sake towards abstract knowledge creation, to the cultural or community research perspective that sees research as serving some specific purpose or need of the community with in which it is situated.

This observation prompts the recommendation that Aboriginal services at the University do not necessarily need to be solely for Aboriginal students. Qualitative research teams and project leaders who conduct research in which Aboriginal people are human subjects could access Aboriginal perspectives in their planning stages from current Aboriginal students, facilitated through the ASSC. The services of Aboriginal students may provide for more culturally responsive research and create another arena for inclusiveness and sense of achievement for the service provider: the Aboriginal student.

Supporting this recommendation but in a different aspect is the experience of the participant who accessed the Specialized Support for Disabled Students (SSDS) office.

She observed that advice from that office should have included a reference to ASSC for the option of access to a culturally appropriate healing response. She made the specific recommendation that "Aboriginal students should be able to go to any office on campus and get appropriate services, and ASSC can be that resource for these other services."

Recommendation

Considering these two recommendations together, including Aboriginal student perspectives in an increased capacity appears to be beneficial to both the University environment and provides the inclusiveness that Aboriginal students require to feel a part of the University community. Repeating the quotation from the University GFC Policy Manual is relevant here.

> The University of Alberta has heightened its efforts to increase the number of Aboriginal people on campus and to facilitate the success of Aboriginal students generally. Recognizing that the enhanced participation of Aboriginal people enriches and broadens its intellectual and cultural environment, the University remains committed to the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of Aboriginal descent. (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13)

The solicitation and utilization of Aboriginal students for culturally appropriate research ethics review and advice would enhance their participation in the academic life of the institution. Access to the ASSC for appropriate recommendations and referrals by general University service providers may also enhance the participation of Aboriginal students. Both of these recommendations appear to fit the goal of enriching and

broadening the intellectual and cultural environment of the University and are poised to serve the needs of the Aboriginal student community.

Assumption 2

The individuals who are well versed in indigenous knowledge and traditional methodologies will talk and share their stories with me.

The specifics of this assumption regarding indigenous knowledge and traditional methodologies, as with the previously mentioned assumption, came to be outside the scope of this research. However, there is an important observation in relation to this assumption.

There was an aspect of ethnographic, or participant observation employed that revealed a potentially guarded naturalistic response to the interviews. The participants conducted themselves slightly differently when in the interview, particularly the individuals with whom I had a longer relationship. When reflecting upon my observations in the research process in comparison to my observations when not "conducting research" there was a different mode of conduct received from participants. In these cases, my role as primary researcher and interviewer appeared to elicit a different, more formal attitude. When I consider this point from the etic researcher perspective, observing how students interact within the University environment, to reveal and "understand shared meanings and taken for granted assumptions" (Wellington, 2000, p. 45), then it can be considered within an ethnographic approach. Participation in the informal discussions between fellow Aboriginal students throughout the years can be described as friendly and supportive.

When the interview was conducted, this friendly supportive attitude shifted to one of serious formality. In each case, the participant, whom I would consider a peer, appeared to treat me as an authority, as a representative of the institution. The support of the participant was still felt; however, the atmosphere was more official than friendly or collegial. Wellington (2000) further suggested that desirable rapport in the interview setting is to distinguish between the priority of task involvement and the necessary but lower priority of social interaction (p. 77). This occurred naturally for the participants. The unprompted shift into interview mode was evident by each participant in every interview. Griffiths (1998) suggests that using the "outside insider" perspective for research purposes poses a danger when the researcher utilizes cultural protocols of social interaction as a kind of deception, potentially risking exploitation of that insider position. Awareness of this potential exploitation by the participants may explain the more formal attitude witnessed within the interview format, and suggests the potential that guarded responses may have occurred.

Upon further reflection of this observation it struck me that I may have witnessed the manifestation of an acquired skill of bi-cultural individuals, the ability to successfully navigate and walk in two worlds.

Assumption 3

The residual effects of colonialism such as the residential school experience and the child welfare generations (60's & 70's scoop) have disrupted the inter-generational transfer of indigenous knowledge (Smith, M. 2004, LaFrance, 2006).

This assumption may or may not play a role in post-secondary preparation and achievement. This research did not focus upon this assumption. As with the previous two assumptions, my original thoughts regarding the relevance of indigenous knowledge were not directly reflected in the narratives from Aboriginal students about their University experiences. The assumption deserves investigation into whether or not the University or any post-secondary institution can play a role in the inter-generational transfer of indigenous knowledge. However as this research project progressed, it became evident that the University experiences shared by the participants were not directly related to either the presence, or absence, of indigenous knowledge within the University environment or the curriculum.

Perceived levels of acculturation and/or assimilation may also be relevant to the University experiences of the participants, but again, this was not the focus of this research.

A more relevant research question within the realm of University recruitment might be to investigate the educational attainment of the previous generations of the participants. Such research may reveal important attitudes and assumptions towards post-secondary education that affect Aboriginal students today. I did not investigate this question, however I did provide the contextual background in a collective sense and some of the responses speak to this issue. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, situating today's Aboriginal student within that contextual background I necessary to understand their experiences.

Of the two participants who stated that their family prepared them for post-secondary education from an early age, only one referred to a family member of the previous generation who had attended University and that was an Aunty who was attending University when the participant enrolled.

Each of the participants cited friends, counselors or work supervisors as being influential in the transition from high school to post-secondary education. In two of these cases, the transition was not direct, but included a period of study at another post-secondary institution. None of the participants related their postsecondary initiatives as being influenced by their parents' postsecondary achievements.

Existing research into educational attainment in relation to assimilation of immigrants (Gang & Zimmermann, 2000) and in relation to single parents differentiated by exposure, gender and race (Fitzgerald-Krein & Beller, 1988) could inform further research of individual Aboriginal educational attainment, however such a project is beyond consideration here.

Assumption 4

The goals and priorities of some indigenous students may not align with the goals and priorities of the University.

Some Aboriginal students may view the educational experience at the University at best, as less of a priority, and at worst; as threatening to their cultural, spiritual and

psychological selves (Hampton, 1995; Kawagley, 1995). Two points to support this assumption became evident as the research progressed.

One was highlighted in the fact that each of the female participants left to have children before completion of their post-secondary programs. The University experience must be seen as less of a priority than motherhood in all these cases. They all viewed the birth of their children as an achievement; none of these participants viewed that decision as a failure to complete their programs. This research is not poised to examine this aspect of the assumption fully because all of the female participants returned to University. As mentioned earlier in this section, upon leaving their programs of study for maternal reasons, all the female Aboriginal students who participated in this research had some form of support network established and working to enable their return to their programs at the University. This raises an important question that requires further research: How many female Aboriginal students leave their University programs incomplete due to the lack of support for their return?

The other emergent support of this assumption appeared in the majority of participants referring to their educational attainment as beneficial to their communities. Two participants stated that of their reasons for pursuing a University education was to increase their earning potential. This demonstrates an aspect of alignment between what the University sees itself as offering to Aboriginal students (as outlined in chapter one) and why some Aboriginal students pursue a University education. One of these participant's aspiration shifted from increasing her earning potential while preparing for

University entrance. She discovered a passion for Cree language and creative writing which resulted in a change of focus and choice of program. The other participant has set high expectations for him/herself having stated that attainment of a high-ranking public office is a long-term goal after gaining a University degree. All of the participants made some reference to improving Aboriginal conditions.

Only one of the participants viewed her presence on campus as beneficial to the University environment through involvement on a research team. This suggests that more effort to involve Aboriginal students in different aspects of the University community may be required if the University wishes to enhance its cultural environment through the participation of Aboriginal students.

Assumption 5

The institutional perspective of the benefits of a University education should be self-evident.

Generally, University achievements are measured statistically in representation of numbers of students admitted, currently enrolled, and finally graduating. The assumption in these quantitative studies is that "educational attainment" is a primary goal of enrolled students. Why should this be the goal of University achievement? Institutional responses come in the form of increased earning potential and informed citizenship. The former was discussed in my response to the original Assumption #4, in the last few pages. The latter may be viewed differently by Aboriginal students than the majority of non-Aboriginal students. Informing others of the reality of the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and

communities in Canada is a role that our participants have assumed from time to time. A lack of knowledge and awareness regarding Canadian Aboriginal history and cultural diversity has been observed by our participants amongst their non-Aboriginal peers and occasionally in their course content. In this way, the institutional goal of producing an informed citizenship appears in support of the recommendation mentioned earlier: Including Aboriginal student perspectives in an increased capacity appears to be beneficial to both the University environment and provides the inclusiveness that Aboriginal students require to feel a part of the University community. These reasons are self-evident in the majority of our participants' views.

The participants all identified the completion of their programs and earning their respective degrees as goals, but this was always associated with some statement about a higher priority regarding Aboriginal community enhancement or social justice. But is the achievement of these goals worth having to navigate the University environment to realize them?

The following sections outline the three common themes that emerged in relation to navigating the University environment: racism, cultural inclusiveness and Aboriginal resources. All the participants made reference to each of these themes when describing their experiences at the University and in proposing suggestions for better services.

Racism

The fact that all participants cited racism as an important issue on campus, demonstrates that the existence of racism on campus is a detriment to retention. Whether experienced directly as conscious efforts or statements from others to exclude, or indirectly in polite but ignorant questions from others, or as institutionally sanctioned systemic factors such as noticeable procedural requirements that conflict with cultural priorities, each of the participants felt that participation in the University environment requires that they confront and navigate through or around racism. The common strategy that emerged from this study was to seek cultural inclusiveness.

Cultural Inclusiveness

The participant who described how her grades declined due to the change in high schools to be among other Aboriginal students, putting her University admission at risk, highlights an important point. It appears that for this student, cultural inclusiveness was more important than maintaining exceptional grades. Although not directly a narrative of her University experience in relation to services, I include this point because it is certainly relevant to the priorities of Aboriginal students, even those with exceptional grades. Evidence of seeking cultural inclusiveness at the University did emerge. The culturally homogenous environment at ASSC functions and events, the TYP, and the Faculty of Native Studies provided an immediate sense of belonging and some level of comfort. The two TYP alumni and the two participants who transferred to Native studies stated that being with other Aboriginal students was a positive experience. Being able to talk about things that are important to Aboriginal people with Aboriginal people was

cited more than once as a factor in their retention. "This speaks very clearly to an answer: a pathway to success comes through culturally congruent and responsive education" (Steinhauer, p. 85).

Aboriginal Resources

To include consideration of cultural ethics in addition to the institutional ethics is an important point to one of the graduate students. It actually provides her with a sense of contribution and achievement when her cultural perspective is included as part of a research team. In this sense, Aboriginal students can be a resource for the institution.

The University sees the ASSC as a resource for Aboriginal students. One participant clearly suggested a paradigm shift to consider the ASSC as resource for all other services on campus. Her original point was that a referral to ASSC was missing when she accessed health services from a different University service provider. That referral may have helped her access more traditional healing methods in her time of need. She then expanded this point to propose the benefits to the University environment in the form of cultural sensitivity advice from Aboriginal perspectives potentially accessed through ASSC. This type of service could benefit research projects that affect Aboriginal peoples, from across different faculties. Increasing familiarity of the ASSC and their services in mainstream campus life by including Aboriginal perspectives in service delivery (i.e. disability support services) and in qualitative research planning can be thought of as a responsive strategy to systemic racism.

The students providing the Aboriginal perspectives on research teams and service delivery would feel supported through a sense of participation and contribution to the University environment. Such participation would also provide experience for Aboriginal students. If Aboriginal students feel as though they are contributing to the intellectual and cultural environment of the University, then they likely are. Utilizing Aboriginal student perspectives to assist University services other than Aboriginal services can be demonstrated as movement towards the goals of the University's Aboriginal Student Policy:

> 1. To provide a university environment which will encourage full access, participation and success for Aboriginal students.
>
> 2. To enrich all aspects of the intellectual and cultural life of the University through increased participation of Aboriginal students. (University of Alberta, GFC Policy Manual, 2005, 108.13.1)

Final Reflections

Stemming from my assumptions entering this research project, one of my initial goals was to investigate the relevance and accommodation of indigenous traditions at the University by accessing the experiential knowledge of Aboriginal students. I began this work with certain assumptions, three of which have since proved to have some validity and two, less so, or none. Whether or not the participants are well versed in indigenous traditions and knowledge did not emerge from this research. Data analysis stages of the research revealed that my original assumptions may have been misdirected. LaSala

(2003) warns of assuming common cultural understandings when researching from the "outside insider" perspective, and failing to allow for unique perspectives. It was this warning that caused me to revisit the data with the renewed focus of listening more carefully to the participant's individual voices. This warning came to me later in the research process and informed how I proceeded through data analysis and reporting.

Recommendations for the Future

In the recommendations provided is optimism for the future of increasing Aboriginal participation at the University of Alberta. Despite the diversity among current Aboriginal students, the common themes emergent from this research help provide a better understanding of their experiences. The participants generously gave their time and personal stories to this project with a vision of removing some of those barriers for future Aboriginal students. The participants must be viewed as successful in negotiating and overcoming the barriers to their participation in the University environment. Therefore, the findings of this research are poised to inform the University how Aboriginal students successfully negotiate the University environment. Whilst identifying recommendations for policy development within the University was not a goal of this research project, nonetheless some specific ideas and recommendations have emerged which are worth considering. For instance supporting the needs of mature students and parents may potentially assist Aboriginal students who left for family reasons, return to the University. Utilizing the Aboriginal student perspectives as a resource facilitated through the ASSC holds the potential to increase Aboriginal cultural awareness and enrichment at the

University and provide the inclusiveness that the participants of this research identified as important.

Conclusion

I conclude this work as I began it, with some personal reflections on my own place within this research. The undertaking of this research has been more than a learning experience; it has been a journey of self-discovery. Coming to an understanding of my assumptions of common cultural understandings played a significant role in this project. This should be evident throughout this thesis. What may not be as evident is the self-reflection of my place in academia. Coming to discover that I assumed findings before looking has been cause for constant reflection. In that reflection have been times of reflexive analysis, which admittedly at times had me reassessing what I expect from my academic endeavors and questioning my ability and goals. In sharing and discussing these thoughts with other students, I am not alone. Self-discovery is a natural byproduct of the seeking (research) process. In fact, self-discovery is the unequivocal goal of indigenous research methodologies. I believe that human knowledge grows out of the human experience. The journey to produce this Masters Thesis is the experience of an Aboriginal student at the University of Alberta.

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